

Precise Warriors: The Evolution of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Security Strategy

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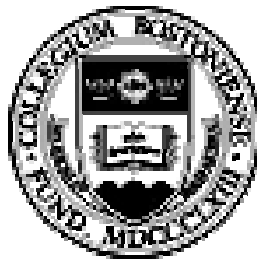
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Precise Warriors:
The Evolution of Special Operations Forces
in U.S. Security Strategy

**An Honors Thesis in Political Science,
Submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences Honors Program
at Boston College**



By: Jason Albino Mangone

**Under the Advisement of
Professor Timothy Crawford, PhD.**

To Nonna, Pop, Mom-mom, Pop-pop, and all the other great people of their generation, who, in foregoing their own educations, came to the United States to give the people of my generation the opportunity to receive the finest education in the world. Their courage is my greatest motivation.

To my Dad, for being a tireless yet always constructive critic and a constant source of inspiration; and to my Mom, the kindest, gentlest Army Major I have ever known, for serving our country for twenty-one years and for sparking my interest in the military.

Finally, to Kara, for spending countless hours with me in all of Boston College's libraries and most of its classrooms, and for letting me complain but forcing me to write.

Introduction

“The *Washington Post* reported that US Special Operations forces are actually in various parts of Iraq, with some already hunting for weapons sites.”¹ Ambiguous lines like this are oftentimes seen in newspapers and magazines, or read on the news, especially in the post-9-11 world. Images of burly men painted in green, outfitted in camouflage and a Rambo-esque bandana, donning night-vision goggles, and armed with the newest weaponry are drawn forth when thinking of the phrase “Special Operations.” There is a certain myth surrounding the community: Special Operators are the greatest warriors in the world. The use of these warriors is usually only thought of in a tactical context. This thesis, in looking beyond the battlefield adventures of Special Operators, asks the question: “How do these warriors do this job, and what ends do they serve in greater US security strategy?”

That question can be answered in different ways at varying points in history. Special operations forces (SOF) were brought into the military in support of World War II, then the capability was destroyed; then SOF were re-activated for conflicts in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, but were again largely deactivated following the Vietnam Conflict. Events in the early 1980s would finally make a standing SOF capability essential to U.S. security strategy; from then to the present, SOF have undergone a vast growth.

This thesis analyzes the evolution of the SOF capability vis-à-vis U.S. security strategy in six chapters. Chapter one establishes a framework for this analysis by

¹ Tom Gjelten, reporting for National Public Radio, February 13, 2003.

offering a modern definition for special operations in contrasting them with conventional forces and answering the question: “What makes special operations so special?”

The next three chapters are quite historical in focus. Chapter two leaps back in time, asking why SOF were originally brought into the U.S. military pantheon in the early 1940s. Chapter three looks at the role of SOF in supporting a total war via a study of their use in World War II. Chapter four describes the role of SOF in the late-1950s through the end of the Vietnam Conflict.

The final two chapters leave much more room for an analysis of SOF in U.S. security strategy. Chapter five describes the events that led to the final indoctrination of the SOF capability. Building on this discussion, chapter six analyzes the role of SOF in U.S. security strategy from the early 1990s through the present. The closing chapter also includes a conclusion to the entire thesis that offers suggestions for the proper use of SOF in U.S. strategy.

Table of Contents

1. <i>What Makes them so “Special” and “Limited” Strategic Implications</i>	6
2. <i>The Evolution Begins</i>	28
3. <i>World War II: SOF in Support of Total War</i>	34
4. <i>An Organization Without Organization</i>	47
5. <i>SOF in the Carter and Reagan Administrations: Establishing the Modern Context</i>	79
6. <i>Utilizing then Coalescing the Capability: The Strategic Roles of SOF from Multifarious to Unified</i>	111
<i>Bibliography</i>	161

-1-

What Makes them so “Special” and “Limited” Strategic Implications

To answer the question: What role do special operations play in U.S. security strategy?, the first chapter of this thesis will give a basic definition of special operations as they are understood today and will move on to provide an explanation of the classic theories, and more specifically the shortcomings and problems, surrounding conventional forces in the areas of military doctrine, general organization (as it deals with organization, professionalism, and education), innovation, and limited war; then, the heart of the chapter will further define special operations forces (SOF) by analyzing what is so “special” about them: what do doctrine, general organization, innovation, and limited war mean in the context of special operations? Furthermore, how do SOF answer the problems that conventional forces have in these four areas and what are the shortcomings of SOF? By answering these questions, SOF will be contrasted with conventional forces, and a framework will be set up through which it will eventually be possible to analyze when, why, and how special operations should be used as a tool of U.S. policy as opposed to conventional forces. It must be recognized that chapters 2-6 of this thesis will serve to show the growth of SOF to the understanding explained here.

Special Operations Defined

SOF is an all-encompassing acronym that can be substituted for two terms: special forces (SF) and other forces that conduct special operations. Special forces mean only Green Beret units of the U.S. Army. Other forces included in U.S. SOF are Navy

SEALs, Air Force Combat Control and Pararescue teams, Army Rangers, and Marine Corps Reconnaissance commandos, as well as other classified teams, some affiliated with the military, others associated with the CIA.

Special Operations are conducted by specially trained, equipped, and organized DOD forces against strategic or tactical targets in pursuit of national military, political, economic, or psychological objectives. These operations may be conducted during periods of peace or hostilities. They may support conventional operations, or they may be prosecuted independently.²

SOF, then, are any forces, such as those mentioned above, that conduct such missions.

Covert Action (CA) and Covert Operations (CO) are terms often mistaken to mean Special Operations. CA or CO are defined as “Activities conducted in support of national foreign policy objectives abroad which are planned and executed so that the role of the United States Government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly.” These types of activities are not necessarily military; they may include secret diplomacy, propaganda, and misinformation.³ To dispel any myths: special operations do not always deal with war and they may be covert or overt action.

It is easier to define SOF in the terms that they contrast the tool of classical military analysis: conventional forces. Tables 1 and 2 show a basic divide between the two types of forces. Table 1 shows the difference in general characteristics, while table 2 shows the difference in how the two types of forces are typically utilized. The following divisions will be analyzed in greater depth whenever it is appropriate throughout.

² David Isenberg, “Special Forces: Shock Troops for the New Order,” *Middle East Report*, No. 177 (July-August 1992), p. 24.

³ Lori Fisler Damrosch, “Covert Operations,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 83., No. 4 (October 1989), p. 796 from Executive Order No. 12,333, §3.4h, 1981.

TABLE 1-CHARACTERISTICS⁴

	SOF	Conventional
Personnel	Exceptional motivation and ability	National average
Equipment	Highly modified, uniquely procured	Standardized
Training	Joint; often with foreign forces	Service; usually with national forces
Size	Smaller: groups, regiments, wings	Larger: armies, numbered air forces, fleets

TABLE 2-UTILIZATION⁵

	SOF	Conventional
Maneuver	Break contact with friendly forces	Maintain contact with friendly forces
Combat	Plan for brief, selective combat	Plan for protracted, inclusive combat
Risk	Accept high risk of failure, loss to force	Hedge, circumvent, reinforce
Intent	Exert leverage, use indirection, attack opponent's key capabilities	Attain decisive success

To summarize, then, SOF, in comparison to conventional forces, are smaller units with better equipment, having more motivated and better trained soldiers, that work with other forces, and use the best technology available. When at war, as opposed to conventional forces, SOF may act independently, quickly, and at a high risk in order to destroy an opponent's key capabilities. This is a general statement, and a better understanding of it will be had after the Doctrine portion of the chapter, where the missions that SOF are capable of are discussed.

⁴ Bruce Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994), p.10, Figure 2.2.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7, Figure 2.1.

Doctrine

Conventional

Conventional military doctrine is a topic that can be analyzed on almost innumerable levels. To start, there is air, land, sea, and space doctrine. Within each area of operation, there is different doctrine for each situation. In other words, the doctrine the Marine Corps would use in attacking a well-defended island in the Pacific is different from the doctrine it would prescribe to in attacking a building in Baghdad. The United States Army would use one set of doctrine to defend a nuclear plant and another set of doctrine to defend a convoy. Any situation can essentially be thrown in there, and if it has ever happened before, or if there is a possibility of it ever happening, the US military has doctrine for it.

Doctrine springs from many sources: it is situational, economic, and geo-political. It can be forced by the civilian sector and can be influenced by innovation.⁶ All doctrine can somehow be traced to the nine principles of war (Mass, Objective, Offense, Maneuver, Economy of Force, Security, Surprise, Unity of Command, Simplicity). There is so much doctrine, in other words, that to describe all of it would be a book in itself. As such, the greater analysis will be of special operations doctrine.

Special Operations

As can be inferred from the above explanation, to generally explain large-scale military doctrine is a task that usually ends in obscurity. To contrive explicit analysis, it is necessary to specialize the area of analysis. As such, an analysis of Special Operations doctrine can be quite succinct. This will be a three-fold analysis. First, I will describe

⁶ Barry R. Posen, "Explaining Military Doctrine," *The Use of Force, 5th Edition*, edited by Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 23-43.

the types of missions that SOF are usually tasked with. Second, I will describe actual special operations doctrine. Third, I will explain the shortcomings of special operations doctrine.

It is difficult to determine which to explain first: the missions inform the doctrine and the doctrine informs the missions in a symbiotic relationship. As a result of the small size of the special operations community, there is less to get in the way of the channel of communication between mission and doctrine. From a military standpoint, then, this is an organizational advantage in special operations doctrine: fewer and better-trained soldiers come between mission and doctrine; there is a practicality and an adherence to reality in this fact that contributes to much of the success of SOF on the field of battle.

First, then, a discussion of the actual missions that SOF have been tasked with. The missions they are tasked with are a result of their certain qualities and doctrine. It is not that these missions are “better” than those of conventional forces; they are simply better suited to the characteristics and doctrine of SOF. There are several missions that SOF are capable of. The first is abstract and the rest succinct.

1-SOF can take on any imperceptible mission. In a situation that has never been faced, SOF can readily be called in. While hostage rescue is a mission that SOF train for, there was no succinct doctrine for rescuing hostages from an airplane. In 1977, German GSG-9 Commandos rescued 78 hostages from an airplane in Mogadishu, Somalia by climbing up ladders at the back of the plane, plotting a diversionary attack at the main entrance, and then shooting expertly once inside the aircraft.⁷ Because they are trained to be self-sufficient thinkers and experts in war (both to be discussed in a later section), SOF soldiers have the ability to adapt to a new security threat.

⁷ Ross S. Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 56.

2-In addition to this abstract mission, SOF have seven “doctrinal,” or succinctly published missions, and ten “collateral” missions. The seven doctrinal missions are: counterterrorism, special reconnaissance, direct action, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, psychological operations, and civil affairs. The ten collateral missions are: security assistance, humanitarian aid, antiterrorism, counterdrug operations, search and rescue, civic action, noncombatant evacuation, counterproliferation, peacekeeping, and show of force.⁸ It should be noted that all of these roles are limited; all special operations deal, to some extent, in limited warfare, which is why a section of the chapter will be devoted to an analysis of that subject.

The doctrine that both provides for and comes from these missions can best be summarized in four “SOF Truths” and nine principles. The four SOF Truths are:

Humans are more important than hardware; Quality is better than quantity; Special operations forces cannot be mass produced; Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.⁹

These truths are quite self-evident, and will be synthesized when necessary through the thesis. The principles are not official in the military, but only inferred from case studies as nine principles key to effective Special Operations warfare. These nine principles are Simplicity, Security, Repetition, Surprise, Speed, Purpose¹⁰, Innovation, Flexibility, and Malleability or Precision. Most of these words are self-explanatory. A few key parts will be explained.

⁸ Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, pp. 4-6.

Congressional Research Service for the Special Operations Panel of the Readiness Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, *United States and Soviet Special Operations* (US Government Printing Office: April 28, 1987), pp. 73-80.

⁹ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement 2000: Providing Unique Solutions for a Changing World* (USSOCOM, 2000), p. 1.

¹⁰ First six from William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), pp. 8-22.

Innovation as part of special operations will be discussed in the section on innovation. It must be noted here only that innovation is part of the principles because SOF use the newest and best weapons in any situation. Flexibility deals with the ability of SOF to adapt within the context of a specific mission, as was exhibited by the GSG-9 rescue of the hostages in Somalia. Malleability or Precision deals with the fact that SOF, as a weapons system in a larger conventional schema, can be precisely tailored to meet many strategic objectives. Because they are capable of so many missions, SOF are malleable. Because of the high-risk nature of most Special Operations, speed is a necessity. Repetition only needs to be clarified as meaning heavy repetitions while training, not repeating actual missions several times.

There are three perceived problems and/or shortfalls that follow SOF doctrine.

1-There seems to be a perception that such a small force cannot have a larger strategic role in a war. This is entirely untrue. In the Gulf War, for example, SOF located and called air strikes on the twenty-nine scud missiles Iraq was prepared to send into Israel in order to draw Israelis into the war, certainly escalating the conflict beyond US intention.¹¹

2-With so many missions, it may be difficult for SOF to perfect any one. This problem is first solved by training Special Operations troops to be flexible. On an organizational level, SOF are broken up into specialized groups. Navy SEALs, for instance, specialize in direct action; Delta Force specializes in rescue; Green Berets specialize in unconventional warfare, and all SOF receive some training in most SOF missions outside of their defined ones.¹²

3-The final problem is one that will confront special operations in many areas. The cost to create a force that is capable of so much is

¹¹ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of US Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 5.

¹² Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose*, pp. 20-22.

great; in terms of equipment and training, some argue that SOF, a very limited community in numbers, are given an undue amount of resources. This can only be disproved once the entire thesis is complete.

General Organization

Conventional

Conventional forces will be explained in three ways here: first, in terms of their organization: the size they operate with and how orders are carried out. Second, in terms of professionalism, or how officers are considered professionals, and enlisted soldiers are not. Third, conventional forces will be explained in terms of their training, and, in terms of officers, their professional military education (PME).

On deployment, divisions of conventional forces are sent; in other words, thinking is done in terms of tens of thousands. When deployed, the commander of a certain theatre is given five-star general rank. So, not even including civilians that must begin thinking about military strategy and political objectives, there are eleven officer ranks; with more and more officers the lower the rank goes. Commands must pass from civilians to officers, then from officers down to enlisted soldiers. Obviously, there are situations such as air strikes where the bureaucracy of command is smaller due to the necessity of acting quickly on intelligence; the point of this is simply to say that conventional doctrine does three things: first, it leaves a lot of room for error. A mistake in judgment is generally more likely to be caught when there is a lot of time in between the idea itself and the action behind the idea. Second, because of this structure, there is a long wait to plan a large conventional action. Third, once the action does begin, there is less room to change it: because one unit can be vital to the success of a larger operation,

if a single unit does not perform its task, even if things do not go as planned, it can hurt the operation if that unit improvises on what it is told. Fourth: because of their size, larger conventional actions usually look to have a very large, war-changing effect.

In the conventional military, it is classically assumed that there is a large schism in between what an officer is and what an enlisted soldier is. The conventional officer is thought of as a professional. His central skill is the “management of violence.”¹³

The duties of the military officer include: (1) the organization, equipping, and training of this force; (2) the planning of its activities; and (3) the direction of its operation in and out of combat. The direction, operation, and control of a human organization whose primary organization is the application of violence is the peculiar skill of the officer...It distinguishes the military officer *qua* military officer from the other specialists which exist in the modern armed services. The skills of these experts may be necessary to the achievement of the objectives of military force. But they are basically auxiliary vocations...It must be remembered that the peculiar skill of the officer is the management of violence, not the act of violence itself. Firing a rifle, for instance, is basically a mechanical craft.¹⁴

That is to say, enlisted men do not generally manage violence, and simply do as they are told. This is not always true, as some leaders of smaller groups are indeed non-commissioned officers (NCOs). I draw two conclusions from this: first, this structure of professional or order-giver commanding the enlisted member or order-taker is necessary on a large-scale conventional level; to not have this structure would hurt the ability of the conventional military to succeed. Second, because of this structure in a complex and multi-layered battlefield, it is very difficult for soldiers to adapt to a battle that may change course at any moment. There is no sense of the individual, which is necessary, but may, in some cases, be detrimental. This is why large-scale conventional operations generally only take place in the closest to ideal conditions possible. The delay of D-Day

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 11-13.

until June 6, 1944 is an example of this, as the planned date of invasion was postponed due to weather.

Training is given to the conventional military in light of this command structure. Officers are taught about leadership, while enlisted members are taught to follow orders, and only adapt when necessary. Also, it should be noted that, due to the size of the conventional military, it is difficult to give men a lot of time to train. While both officers and enlisted men train in general tactics quite sufficiently, it is a large logistical problem to get so many men to do the amount of specific tactical training necessary; it should especially be considered that this is so in time of war, when a bit of doctrine may need to change for that specific campaign, it is difficult to give such a large force the requisite training in new doctrine when men are needed on the battlefield. The rushed training of Marines during the Vietnam War is an outstanding example of this.

Special Operations

SOF will be analyzed in the same three ways that conventional forces were. To begin with, there is one unified United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). It is inherently smaller than any large conventional command, even though it includes SOF from every service. Likewise, on deployment, there is a Special Operations Command set up in each area of operation. Throughout this section, I will use the case of a SEAL operation in the Gulf War. As part of General Schwarzkopf's fake amphibious invasion, a group of Navy SEALs was tasked with destroying underwater mines and conducting underwater surveillance of the beach area. In Iraq special operations were led by Special Operations Command, Central Command (SOCCENT). Outside of the team itself, there is a much smaller bureaucracy for an order

to go through than in the conventional sense; this is inherent in the small size.

Shwarzkopf, the US Commander-in-Chief, Central Command (USINCCENT), gave a direct order to the commander of SOCCENT. He gave an order to the commander of the Naval Special Warfare Group, who then briefed “Task Unit Mike.”¹⁵ Task Unit Mike performed the mission. Task Unit Mike, a SEAL team, would have no more than seven members. This has a few implications: first, there is very little room for error as a very large task is kept within a very isolated and small community. As such, the second point: the importance of the objective is much larger than the size of the force; or despite their small size, SOF can have a very large war-changing effect. Third: the smaller bureaucracy makes for quick action. Presently, for instance, “The Pentagon is promoting a global counterterrorism plan that would allow Special Operations forces (SOF) to enter a foreign country to conduct military operations without explicit concurrence from the U.S. ambassador there.”¹⁶ Fourth: because of their small size, training, and the isolation of their missions, SOF are very adaptable in battle.

The small size of SOF (some operate on the level of one or two soldiers), and the nature of their missions necessitate a blurred line in between enlisted and officer. In the case of Task Unit Mike, there were approximately seven men with only one officer. They were operating underwater; obviously apart from any larger conventional force. Indeed, the officer is still in charge. However, in such a situation, each man must be able to rely on his own instincts to make a decision. Another case of this can be cited by a team of one Air Force Combat Controller and one Navy SEAL. The two set up an observation post for two weeks calling down air strikes on an Al-Qaeda encampment in

¹⁵ Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, pp. 35-37.

¹⁶ Ann Scott Dyson and Dana Priest, “Pentagon Seeking Leeway Overseas: Operations Could Bypass Envoys,” *The Washington Post* (24 February 2005), p.1.

Afghanistan¹⁷: here, two enlisted men alone were responsible for the *direction* of air strikes; the direction of violence is something that Huntington inherently associates with officership. It is not that there is no leader; that leader simply does not need to be an officer.

This individualism is made more evident when the initial training of SOF is considered.

The thrust of conventional force training, after all, is the achievement of consistent performance of routine tasks to the highest attainable average standard. By contrast, the emphasis in Special Operations is on directing individual skills to the accomplishment of functions unique to a given mission, generally a high-risk one. Improvisation and independent thinking are essential.¹⁸

Consider the training of the SEAL element of Task Unit Mike. Officers go to their Officer Candidate School, and enlisted soldiers go through their basic training. Once at Basic Underwater Demolition/SEALs (BUD/S) School, however, the men go through training together. While officers generally lead boat crews at BUD/S, and one officer is a class leader, the two work together simultaneously to foster an attitude of community. The men doing the training are even enlisted; contra Huntingtons's argument, enlisted men are somewhat responsible for the training of officers here. (Furthermore, in Marine Corps Scout Sniper School, for example, teams of two enlisted men are taught to operate independently). In the end, a BUD/S class will graduate approximately ten percent of the men that started after a period of two years. After that two years, the men finally go into battle. SOF training is just above average.

All special operations forces share certain characteristics. Be they a one man "unit" or a battalion, special operations forces can be identified by their flexibility, versatility, adaptability, responsiveness, durability, ingenuity, and capacity to act independently of other military forces. Because special operations are situation-specific and are not easily planned far in advance, special

¹⁷ Michael Hirsch, *None Braver: US Air Force Pararescuemen in the War or Terrorism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁸ Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose*, p. xvii.

operations forces must be ready to treat the unconventional as if it were conventional, and to train for the extraordinary as if it were the ordinary.¹⁹

There are a couple problems associated with this type of necessary training.

First, the men must learn to be adaptable, that is, they must have a very wide base of knowledge, while at the same time learning a specialized task such as underwater demolition, or in the case of Green Berets, another language. General skills can suffer as a result of requisite specialization.²⁰ Furthermore, in order to gain the expertise necessary to have such an elite force, an enormous amount of money must be spent on a very small force. It should also be noted that as a result of the difficulty of the training, SOF are given a heightened position in their respective services. It is understood that they are outside of the regular community. In the Air Force, for example, only special operations soldiers wear berets: this is a symbol for their separateness and their eliteness. There is, simply put, an understanding that SOF guys are different than the conventional guys.²¹ This understanding leads to a unique relationship among SOF warriors that does not exist to so great an extent in the conventional military. “While members of other military units, particularly in the Marine Corps, maintain a strong sense of loyalty and identity...a distinctive aspect of SOF organizational culture is that it cuts across military service lines. A sense of a common and highly valued organizational bond exists among the members of the [SOF] community.”²² The SOF organization encourages togetherness among the special operators within every service. The enlisted, furthermore, simply have a more open relationship with officers in SOF.

¹⁹ Steven Lambakis, “‘Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World’: The Contributions of Special Operations to Victory,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April-June, 1994), p. 213.

²⁰ Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose*, pp. 18-20.

²¹ Hirsch, *None Braver: US Air Force Pararescuemen in the War on Terrorism*

²² Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 57.

Insofar as training within the context of a war, SOF pose one advantage and one disadvantage. Repetition is one of the principles of special operations. That is to say, when SOF are tasked with a mission, because of their small size, it is not a logistical problem to rehearse for that specific task.²³ Part of Task Unit Mike's mission, for example, included a rehearsal of the exact diversionary task they were to undertake.²⁴ The only problem with SOF training in wartime is that SOF is a small community in high demand: as the type and quality of the individual soldier is essential to the effective execution of special operations, the initial training will never shorten in length or decrease in retention standards. In other words, there will always be very few soldiers and their initial training can never be rushed due to the decrease in effectiveness it would produce.

Innovation

Conventional Difficulty

It is common sense that if one man has a club and another has a gun, the man with the gun will kill the man with the club. With that being said, militaries that are in war²⁵ generally take it for granted that innovation is good. There are two types of problems with innovation on the conventional level, however. First, the assumption that innovation is always tactically or strategically good is not correct for two reasons. Second, when innovation would actually be good, there are four problems with making innovation happen.

²³ McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), pp. 15-16.

²⁴ Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, pp. 35-37.

²⁵ Obviously, constant innovation can lead to arms races and then war. As such, innovation can have negative effects in terms of beginning a war. Many arguments like this are made about the causes of World War I.

The assumption that innovation is always good in war is incorrect because, when innovation occurs too fast, or weapons have not been properly tested, it is difficult for belligerents to determine how weapons should properly be used. Thus the first problem has to do with the fact that it is very difficult to test a weapon to see if it is better used offensively or defensively. The second problem, resulting from either the difficulty in testing, a misunderstanding, or an improper desire to innovate, is that innovation can lead to a complete misunderstanding of the security dilemma. In World War I, for example, barbed wire, artillery, and machine guns were innovations used for offensive purposes that were in fact better suited for the defense²⁶. Believing the offense is more effective, tactically, when the defense is actually better, or vice-versa, is a horrible consequence that may be brought on by innovation.

Even when innovation is indeed for the best, there are still four problems. (1) The primary problem is that of lag-time. Lag-time is “that lapsed period between innovation and a successful institutional or social response to it.”²⁷ Strategies that deal with successful conventional innovation accept that the only way to do so is in terms of generations. This is necessary because senior officers must understand capabilities, then pass their understanding to younger officers, who must, before they innovate, understand a basic level of war-fighting.²⁸ (2) As weapons become more complex, the lag-time increases, because it is much harder to test complex weapons than basic ones.²⁹ (3) Innovation requires a change in doctrine. It takes a radical spark, and even then the

²⁶ Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, “Offense, Defense, and the Security Dilemma,” *International Politics*, 7th Edition (New York: Pearson, 2005), pp. 178-195.

²⁷ Edward J. Katzenbach, Jr., “The Horse Cavalry in the Twentieth Century,” *The Use of Force*, 3rd Edition, edited by Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p. 152.

²⁸ Stephen Peter Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer, 1988), p. 136.

²⁹ Katzenbach, Jr., “The Horse Cavalry in the Twentieth Century,” p. 152.

military is hesitant, in its nature, to sway from tradition. This increases lag-time.

General Billy Mitchell's voice for the utilization of the air as an effective war-fighting tool and the long-standing role of the horse cavalry³⁰ are testament to a radical spark and resistance to change, respectively. (4) The institutionalization, as Barry Posen puts it, of the conventional military is not kind to change.³¹ There is a large chain of command, and every officer in that chain has a say in whether or not innovation is accepted and doctrine is changed.

Special Operations

Special operations can be analyzed in three ways in terms of innovation. First, innovation must be acknowledged as a key part within the operations of SOF. Innovation in special operations overcomes many of the problems with conventional innovation. Second, SOF must be analyzed as a weapons system that itself can be used to more easily innovate a larger conventional force. Finally, there are some drawbacks and shortcomings to innovation within special operations.

SOF overcome the problems discussed above in conventional forces in three ways. (1) Whereas conventional forces are not accepting of change, SOF welcome it. The increase in lag time comes from a difficulty in changing conventional doctrine; with Special Operations, innovation is a part of the doctrine. It is understood that "innovation simplifies a plan by helping to avoid or eliminate obstacles that otherwise would compromise and/or complicate the rapid execution of the mission."³² Because speed is so vital to the high-risk maneuvers of SOF and part of its doctrine, innovation is usually welcomed. (2) Because the force is so small, the chain of command is so short, and

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 152-169.

³¹ Posen, "Explaining Military Doctrine," p. 31.

³² McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare, Theory and Practice*, p. 13.

training is so much more task-oriented and stresses adaptability, lag time is shortened significantly. A special operations unit can be directly informed to take direct action from any source above it using an innovative weapon. Because of the small nature of the SOF community, units are authorized to procure equipment per mission requirements without much fuss. In a raid on a Vietnamese prison camp, for instance, raiders bought specialized equipment from civilian sources.³³ In other words, SOF are not organized to ask: “Why would I change what has always worked in the past and incur a high cost?;” they are trained to ask: “What new tools can make the mission better no matter what?” Even more, because there is less divide between senior officers and younger officers and enlisted troops, innovation is more easily understood and utilized. (3) Because special operations are nearly always offensive in nature and high-risk no matter what, there is no worry about the security dilemma. The broad consideration of the security dilemma that must be analyzed on the conventional level does not exist in the special operations context. Conventional forces must assess the risk involved in misunderstanding weapons and thus misreading the security dilemma because to misread the situation can lead to an unacceptable loss of force; SOF are more likely to incur high risks by their very nature, as was discussed above.

As a weapons system, SOF are outstanding for innovation. In this sense, they can test a weapon that conventional forces are hesitant to use, thus helping to alleviate the testing problem. It is now common practice for large forces to use Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in surveillance. SOF, as they stay ahead of the conventional lag in innovation, use UAVs to attack enemy targets. A UAV with two hellfire missiles was

³³ Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, p. 11.

utilized by a CIA team in Yemen in November, 2002 to destroy an automobile filled with terrorists.³⁴

Finally, special operations pose two problems in the realm of innovation. (1) SOF utilize innovation, most often, in the form of utilizing highly modified and specialized equipment.³⁵ As they seek to use these innovations in nearly all their missions, and they are permitted to do so by a short chain of command, SOF incur extremely high expenses. (2) There is a lag time involved in SOF innovation. Much of the reason that SOF are able to innovate quickly and innovate well is that they are trained to do so. As discussed in the section on general organization, this training takes a lot of time (it incurs a high cost as well). The lag time involved with innovation in special operations, then, comes in that training elite soldiers is done in terms of years; training conventional forces can be done in terms of months if necessary. Though this lag does exist, it is still much less significant than the conventional lag.

Limited War

The previous three sections have essentially served to separate conventional forces from SOF in terms of defining the force. There is finally a ground upon which it is possible to actually analyze the strategic effect that each may have in war. While SOF may be able to fight as part of a larger total war, it is quite difficult to analyze SOF in this context. The inception of American special operations is widely argued to be in World War II³⁶, when members of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) conducted

³⁴ <http://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/predator/>

³⁵ Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose*, pp. 22-29.

Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, p. 11.

³⁶ There are arguments that counter this one. Some would consider the Trojan Horse to be the first example of a Special Operation. Arguments also exist labeling guerilla warfare in the American Revolution and raids in the Barbary Wars to be the first American utilization of SOF. For arguments like this, see:

sabotage missions on the economic and political infrastructure of Nazi-occupied countries.³⁷ As the U.S. has only fought limited war since WWII, it is almost unnecessary to analyze SOF in the context of total war. SOF have been exclusively utilized in the context of limited war since WWII. The following section will cover conventional theories and shortcomings in terms of limited war, and then explain what SOF can mean in that same context. When this analysis is complete, there will be an adequate framework to analyze how SOF can pose a strategic advantage to conventional forces when thinking about the policy goals of the United States; that is to say, in every case to be analyzed, limited war will be the unifying theme.

Conventional

There are many reasons as to why a nation would fight a limited war—to prevent the spread of Communism (as in Korea), to democratize (as in Afghanistan), and any other policy objective. This section will discuss the utility of a conventional force versus the utility of SOF once limited war has actually begun. There are two basic arguments about limited war in these terms. (1) Once an action has been taken by one side, the enemy has every reason to believe that the same action will be taken again. In other words, if a military sends one division of troops to an area, there is no reason to believe it will not send another. (2) Limited war is about signaling. There are certain thresholds that it should be understood cannot be crossed without consequence. There are five reasons as to why limited war has such restraints. 1- Bargaining is constant in limited war. The only bargaining tools available are the end of the war and the way in which the

John Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times* (New York: University Press of America, 1996). Even Arquilla acknowledges WWII as the beginning of modern American Special Operations.

³⁷ Terry White, *Swords of Lightning: Special Forces and the Changing Face of Warfare* (New York: Brassey's, 1992), p. 3.

war is fought; in other words, military and civilian leaders require a limit to place on the targets they intend to destroy. 2- Most bargaining is done tacitly in the form of a pattern of military action. 3- The arbitrary nature of many signals makes tacit agreements easier to understand. To simplify: an army can cross a river or not. 4- These limits should be clearly understood by tradition and precedent, such as the use of nuclear vs. conventional force. 5- When communication has broken down, such signs are all that remain as a tool of negotiation and as such they must be utilized in limited war.³⁸

Korea is a conventional case study of limited war par excellence. The Chinese entered the war once the US decided to send a large offensive into Korea past the 38th Parallel. Once the United States compromised the integrity of the Korean Government, the Chinese were going to enter no matter what.³⁹ In other words, there is very little leverage with conventional forces. Signals are blatant and overt. A conventional attack, as a symbol, offers very little as a sign; a large conventional attack, as it can be assumed others will follow, can always be assumed to compromise the integrity of the attacked nation, and as such, it is much more likely that force may escalate undesirably, as happened to the United States in Korea. Furthermore, especially when speaking of bombing operations, there is a large fear of collateral damage—that more than just the limited target gets destroyed.

Special Operations

Special operations, in their very size, are a limited tool of national policy. Specifically, they offer much more leverage to policy makers in the context of limited

³⁸ This theory on limited war taken from: Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 126-145.

³⁹ Thomas Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 122-154.

war. As was discussed above, SOF offer a wide array of abilities, and thus can be precisely tailored to meet various policy objectives by sending various signals in the context of a larger conventional war. SOF also offer an outstanding resource in attaining a limited objective without committing a large conventional force in peacetime. Finally, SOF can accomplish limited objectives of a larger abstract war.

First, the reason that SOF offer such a point of leverage is that they work on a purely tactical level, but have strategic effects.⁴⁰ In other words, the sign itself may be one showing a weaker force stance, but the actions of that sign are quite strong. Also, the utilization of SOF to have an effect beyond their limited scope allows conventional forces to concentrate their resources elsewhere in the context of a limited war. The destruction of Scud missiles in the Gulf War may be cited as an example of this. While a small group of commandos participated in the destruction of these 29 missiles, this small group very well may have stopped Israel from entering the war.

In peacetime, SOF can also operate to attain policy objectives. That is to say, they can provide military skills to a situation at a time when a declaration of war is not sought or where conventional forces may exacerbate a crisis.⁴¹ The attempted rescue of hostages from Iran in 1980 is an example of this. The United States did not wish to go to war with Iran; it only wished to rescue its hostages.

Finally, in an abstract war, SOF can accomplish limited objectives where the US is at war with only part of a nation, and not the regime as a whole. In the grander war on terror, for example, the United States has SOF operating in the Philippines. Obviously, the United States does not wish to escalate the conflict within that nation by sending in a

⁴⁰ Pirnie, *Analysis of Special Operations Forces in Decision Aids*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Kelly, *Special Operations and National Purpose*, p. xvii.

large force; and SOF are able to attain strictly the limited objective of fighting Islamist terrorist cells without much collateral damage.⁴²

Conclusion

Because of the characteristics of SOF, in terms of their malleability, their unique organization, their eliteness, their willingness to innovate, and various other unique characteristics, they have the ability to attain a wide array of various policy objectives. The force can tailor itself to the objective very easily. Since World War II, in the cold war era, the post-cold war era, and presently in the war on terrorism, SOF have provided a unique mechanism for the United States to fight limited wars and obtain limited tactical objectives that have a large strategic effect. The rest of this thesis will serve to show how this precisely tailored strategic capability has evolved.

⁴² <http://www.pacom.mil/philimagery/index9.shtml>

-2-

The Evolution Begins

In the history of Special Operations in the United States, there are two timelines. The longer is the timeline that describes the military of the U.S. conducting missions that, by today's definition, would be considered special operations. It is any "Class of military actions that fall outside the realm of conventional warfare during their respective time periods."⁴³ In an international sense, the first instance of a special operation is widely cited as the Trojan horse in the Peloponnesian War; the United States itself has used special operations via unconventional warfare in the Revolutionary War, The War with the Barbary Pirates, and most subsequent wars in its history.

The second timeline, and the one whose inception is to be analyzed here, is the timeline beginning around World War II. Asking why the United States military used SOF in the War is to ask why the United States military decided to indoctrinate SOF into its large-scale, conventional military; for what reason and how did the United States military innovate to include a small, elite force outside of its typical command structure?

Three types of ideas, all of which will be drawn out here, account for why this innovation happened and how it occurred. These four categories of ideas intersect at some points. (1) It was a war-time, not a peace-time innovation. (2) There were specific historical reasons that SOF were needed in WWII. (3) The reasons for and ways by which this innovation was implemented are similar to classical theories of innovation; the actual change in doctrine is unique unto itself. Most innovations include a generation-

⁴³ John Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times* (New York: University Press of America, 1996), p. xvi.

long change in doctrine⁴⁴; in this case, the doctrine only changes to the extent that it makes room for a small, elite group to make its own doctrine. The innovation itself could be characterized as elite.

(1) The fact that this was a war-time innovation suggests that the lag time is significantly decreased. In other words, because of the pressure of war, there was a perceived need to innovate to have SOF and quickly. While it could be argued that the lag-time for this innovation was hundreds of years (stemming from the first utilization of unconventional warfare in the Revolutionary War), the true conception of special operations as a functional part of the military was an idea that went from conception to utilization was much quicker than had the U.S. had the luxury of changing doctrine during peacetime; a process that, in the case of changing the United States Marines into an amphibious assault force, took 37 years⁴⁵. To best understand the perceived need for quick innovation it is necessary to understand the specific historical reasons that Special Operations were needed here.

(2) First and foremost, it must be understood that the United States was involved in total war here; in this case, the strategy becomes victory—winning the war outright is the political end. Special Operations were perceived as strategically and tactically necessary to the political goal of total victory. The role of SOF would be to fight several limited, local wars within the total war in order to reach this end.⁴⁶ Second, there were two major branches of SOF added at the outset of World War II, and the circumstances

⁴⁴ Stephen Peter Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer, 1988), p. 136.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 152.

⁴⁶ Anna Simmons, “The Evolution of the SOF Soldier: An Anthropological Perspective,” *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations*, Edited by Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last (Montreal: Queen’s University Press, 2004), p. 81.

surrounding the inception of each must be understood. The first is the Office of Special Services (OSS), a precursor to Army Special Forces, or Green Berets.⁴⁷ Second is the inception of the Army Rangers.

The OSS emerged out of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's new deal bureaucracy. FDR had an Office of the Coordinator of Information; due to a leadership struggle between the group that controlled propaganda and subversive, guerilla military tactics. The COI quickly split to only control propaganda, while the OSS was created to control all else. In order to protect economic interests and help control the spread of Naziism, the OSS met the perceived necessity of covertly aiding the French against the occupying Germans. A group created in January of 1941 was operational by April of the year—obviously turn-around this quickly meant the need to aid France was perceived as great.⁴⁸ By October of that same year, the director of the OSS, William Donovan, had split his office into Special Intelligence (SI) and Special Operations (SO) branches; and had sanctioned these groups to act together in the field as Operational Groups (OG's).⁴⁹ Additionally, by 1942 in the Pacific Theater, the US needed to help in uprisings against the occupying Japanese in both Burma and the Philippines.⁵⁰ The insurgents on these islands needed US training and assistance. As the United States was fighting a two-front war, it did not have the conventional resources to supply these Low-Intensity Conflicts.

⁴⁷ The organizational structure of OSS Operational Groups in France is remarkably similar to the structure of today's Green Beret A-Teams. Ian Sutherland, "The OSS Operational Groups: Origin of Army Special Forces," *Special Warfare Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June, 2002).

⁴⁸ R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 40.

⁵⁰ John M. Collins, *U.S. Low-Intensity Conflicts 1899-1990: A Study Prepared for the Readiness Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p.111-115.

The Rangers were created for a different reason altogether. The British had a long-standing tradition of having an elite corps of commandoes; in the Spring of 1942, Generals in Europe wished for United States soldiers to gain combat experience before actually invading the mainland as a large force. As such, Colonel Lucian Truscott was tasked with arranging for US troops to participate in British-led commando raids into German-occupied Europe. Truscott was promoted to Brigadier General, and suggested to Generals Marshall and Eisenhower, now in the planning stages in the European theater, that the Americans create their own commando outfit. His request gained approval in two days. The 1st Ranger battalion was activated on 19 June 1942. Though originally created to give troops experience by going on commando raids with the British, the Allies prepared for their invasion of North Africa and the Rangers were deemed too valuable a tool to be deactivated; the Rangers would carry out specific high-risk missions throughout World War II.⁵¹

(3) In four ways, this innovation can be seen as a normal US military innovation. First, from the historical perspective, it is easy to see that the reason for the innovation was military necessity in the strategy of this total war. Further proof of this comes in the fact that Congress allocated no funds to any of the conflicts in France, Burma, or the Philippines: the military chose to spend its resources on special operations.⁵² 2- Rosen says that, in order for the process of change to take place, a change must be sparked by senior military leaders with political pull.⁵³ As was seen above, the Rangers were created with the approval of Generals Marshall and Eisenhower. 3- Civilians usually need to

⁵¹ Dr. Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), p. 5-10.

⁵² Collins, *U.S. Low-Intensity Conflicts 1899-1990: A Study Prepared for the Readiness Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee*, p. 110-115.

⁵³ Rosen, "New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation," p. 140.

intervene in support of a military leader to help change doctrine.⁵⁴ It is evidence enough that the OSS was spawned by the New Deal of President Roosevelt. 4- Finally, as discussed in the first chapter, the military is a structure that generally resists doctrinal change.⁵⁵ Special operations received a lot of criticism in WWII. First, SOF take the best men from conventional units. Winston Churchill regarded SOF as “A dangerous drain on the quality of an infantry battalion.”⁵⁶ Additionally, generals criticized SOF in WWII for ruining the morale of those not chosen for the elite units, the wastefulness of having elite soldiers stand idly by in some major battles, and finally the high casualty rate of most commando missions.⁵⁷

Indeed, every innovation must be new in some way or else it would not be an innovation. The only innovation made by the US military in this situation, however, was changing its doctrine to the extent that it would allow elite, unconventional units to exist. The allowance of SOF as a separate section of the military would prove to bring innovations unlike any other the United States military had seen before. First and foremost, typically successful innovations take part over a generation where senior officers are able to impart new knowledge onto younger officers and younger officers are, in turn, able to act out a re-definition of doctrine.⁵⁸ In this case, the innovation happened much more rapidly, as was already explained. Second, this innovation involved the utilization of more British doctrine than American doctrine—in fact they were taught tactics completely antithetical to American doctrine. “Much of the training for the (OSS)

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Posen, “Explaining Military Doctrine,” p. 31.

⁵⁶ Lt. Col. Bernd Horn, “Special Men, Special Missions: The Utility of SOF—A Summation,” *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations*, Edited by Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last (Montreal: Queen’s University Press, 2004), p. 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14-16.

⁵⁸ Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” p. 136.

OGs was...based on British commandos. It placed a heavy emphasis on physical training, demolition, special weapons, and the hit-and-run tactics of guerillas.”⁵⁹ The basis of the Army Rangers was, as mentioned, to join British commandoes. Third, the innovation involved inventing a totally new command structure outside of the conventional military. At its creation, the OSS was given the mandate to “Plan and operate such services as may be directed by the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff.”⁶⁰ The exact organizational structure will be discussed later, but it should suffice to say that no unit as small as the OSS had ever taken direct orders from the Join Chiefs of Staff. Fourth, SOF were given relative organizational autonomy. At his own behest, William Donovan had the power to split his bureau into two branches. Rangers and the OSS OGs, it will be later shown, also organized their units uniquely for their specific tasks. Finally, the men chosen were elite. In the midst of war, in the example of the Rangers, SOF were deemed so strategically important that they should take away a regular Army battalion’s best men. Rangers, however, were never given their own headquarters.

For the preceding reasons and in the preceding ways, the conventional United States Military—a large, dominant force that relied upon large unit cohesion and a regular chain of command—decided that it was strategically necessary to sanction an elite force separate from itself. The following chapters will discuss the repercussions—positive and negative—and the evolution, of this decision, beginning with the role SOF played in World War II.

⁵⁹ Sutherland, “OSS Operational Groups,” p. 2.

⁶⁰ Smith, *OSS*, p. 2.

-3-

World War II: SOF in Support of Total War

Studying World War II in terms of special operations is a difficult and, in some ways, fruitless task. The war was one won by millions of regular soldiers, slightly aided by SOF. Two things make the analysis worthwhile. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to ask why special operations were indoctrinated by the conventional military. Second, to be discussed here, World War II is most useful as a tool of analyzing the role of SOF in total warfare. It is immediately paradoxical in three ways: SOF engage singularly in limited warfare; in the context of total warfare, then, one must ask why and how elite forces are used in limited roles to support a total war. Furthermore, the utility of a study of total warfare can be questioned by the fact that World War II was the last total war engaged in by the United States. Finally, a large part of the mechanism by which the U.S. has been able to avoid total war is the utility in limited war of SOF itself. Despite this, total war is certainly a possibility in the future, and analyzing World War II provides a unique insight into the way that SOF can work to support any large-scale conventional operation.

Total Warfare Defined

To build a framework upon which to discuss the utility of SOF in World War II, an adequate definition and understanding of total warfare must be established. A simple and common definition of total war is “The total identification of the nation with the

army and the full utilization of a country's resources."⁶¹ This differs inversely, then, from limited war, whereby not all of a country's resources are utilized. As the means by which a total war is fought are unlimited, so are the ends sought—total victory is the aim of total war. With these limitless means and goals, the advance of military technology raises the stakes of war. "During World War I the stakes were still only the relative strength of nations. By World War II the stakes were the existence of nations."⁶² Herein lay the greatest discrepancy between limited and total warfare. One nation will only destroy another nation to the point that it can reach its strategic aim: in limited war, that strategic aim is limited political victory and therefore one nation does not seek the annihilation of its enemy; in total war, where total military victory is the strategic aim, complete annihilation of the enemy is sought without limits. The only thing that hinders complete destruction of a nation is the total surrender of a bellicose nation before it is destroyed.

Roles of SOF in World War II

In the aim of total victory over its enemies in Europe and the Pacific, SOF played limited, supportive roles. Their role can be analyzed in this way in terms of three ways. (1) SOF were given specifically limited missions that did not have the aim of annihilating the enemy; this will be shown via the Cabanatuan prisoner camp rescue. (2) SOF were given highly specialized roles in support of large-scale operations, as in the cases of the successful Battle of Zerstörer and the failed Battle of Cisterna. (3) Highly elite units like the Jedburghs and OSS OGs were given reconnaissance, direct action, and guerilla missions in an attempt to undermine the authority of Nazi-occupied areas of Europe as early as

⁶¹ Roy Pierce, "Political Power, Technology, and Total War: Two French Views," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December, 1958), p. 321.

⁶² *Ibid*, pp. 322-323.

1941 and to support Allied invasions in 1944 and 1945.⁶³ These missions usually involved training and executing with foreign militaries. A section has been given to each of these specific roles; every section concludes by giving theoretical implications on the strategic use of SOF suggested by each war-fighting role.

(1) Very Limited Missions—Cabanatuan

On the Pacific front, in late January of 1945, 128 Rangers of the 6th Ranger Battalion were tasked with rescuing American prisoners at the Cabanatuan prison camp in the Philippines, near Luzon. The prisoners here were survivors of the Bataan Death March, where tens of thousands of American and Filipino troops had died. The Japanese were notoriously cruel to prisoners, and an opportunity to rescue this many troops (521) would not be passed up. The camp was located behind enemy lines and in the midst of heavy Japanese troop movements. A slight failure of intelligence would lead to these 128 Rangers and their Filipino guides and support going up against heavy Japanese artillery and what amounted to two division-size units of Japanese troops.⁶⁴ The intelligence gathered by Alamo Scouts, a special intelligence group, though underestimating the amount of Japanese presence in the area, was enough to let the Rangers to know they would be outnumbered.

What the Rangers lacked in size would need to be made up for with surprise. The battle plans reflected this. To best conceal the soldiers, “The decision was made to attack at dusk...the element of surprise was stressed as being of primary importance to the

⁶³ Terry White, *Swords of Lightning: Special Forces and the Changing Face of Warfare* (New York: Brassey's, 1992), p. 3.

⁶⁴ Dr. Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), p. 56.

success of the mission; all were cautioned to spare no effort to secure the same.”⁶⁵ The plan consisted of breaking the battalion into two platoons and four assault groups. One assault group would sneak up on the compound, kill the guards, and carry out a frontal assault on the camp; the other three assault groups would cover the flanks of the compound, with remaining Rangers being used to find and escort American troops from the camp. Filipino guerillas were used to block the escape road, the City Cabu Highway, and would form a column to stop a counter-attack by the Japanese at the signal of a red flare from a Ranger on the inside once all prisoners were rescued.⁶⁶ The Americans gained surprise, essentially bypassing most of the 7,000 Japanese troops in the area, and saving 511 prisoners, giving the Japanese 523 casualties, and only losing two Rangers killed.⁶⁷ The operation was an unqualified tactical success: now the more important question of the theoretical implications of this operation in terms of SOF actions in extremely limited roles in support of a total war.

(1) Even by special operations terms, this was an action extremely limited in scope. This is manifest by the fact that the Rangers did not conduct training specific to this mission—it was a limited mission of opportunity to the extent that, after 3,000 American prisoners had already perished at Cabanatuan, the Army could not pass up any opportunity to save 521 survivors.⁶⁸ The theoretical implication of SOF here is one of risk assessment. Americans went up against 7,000 Japanese troops. The goal of the

⁶⁵ Operation Report, 6th Ranger Battalion, Pangatian Prison, 27-31 January 1945 (Fort Leavenworth, KS), p. 2. Cited from William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), p. 262.

⁶⁶ William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), pp. 262-263.

⁶⁷ James J. Altieri, *Darby's Rangers: An Illustrated Portrayal of the Original Rangers* (Durham, NC: The Seeman Printery, 1945), p. 44.

⁶⁸ McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, p. 273.

mission was to save 521 prisoners; when fighting a total war where these 521 troops are not strategically significant, it does not make sense to risk 7,000 regular troops—troops that could have a larger strategic effect on the war—to save 521 troops. It is not worth risking large amounts of soldiers for a mission whose goal is not an attempted advance to total victory in the war. On the other hand, it makes much more sense to risk 128 troops trained for direct action. The strategic decision could be diagrammed like this: if the mission fails, the Americans only lose at most 128 troops in addition to 521 already lost; if the mission is a success Americans gain at least a few hundred troops and raise morale. It is a risk that was deemed worth taking. Inherent in the term special operations is the assumption of high risk; in this way, SOF in extremely limited roles in total war allow American war planners to focus more acutely on the ends of victory (saving 521 prisoners) than the means (128 Rangers) possibly lost in defeat.

(2) As these 128 Rangers were victorious, it shows the role of SOF as force multipliers in total war. The strategic end here only raised morale and returned a few hundred troops to the Allied ranks. It will be more evident in their roles in direct support of larger strategic campaigns, but here it is clearly evident that, in overcoming the doctrine of mass with the doctrine of surprise, 128 Rangers were able to tactically defeat 7,000 enemies and in that way act as a force multiplier.

(3) SOF use native people to guide them. They inherently are more willing to use foreign aid to their advantage. This is a lesson that conventional militaries should heed in fighting total war—it is an invaluable intelligence and support weapon.

*(2) Specialized and High-Risk Roles in Support of Larger Conventional Operations—
Defeat at Cisterna and Victory at Zerf*

Ranger operations at Cisterna would be disastrous—of 767 Rangers, 761 were killed or captured. On 22 January 1944, the 6615th Ranger Force landed at Anzio in Italy very smoothly, completing their mission of landing, extending the beachhead, clearing a small town, and meeting up linking with British and American regular infantry divisions to their left and right. In the next few days, the VI Corps (The large unit to which the 6615th Ranger Force was attached) slowly moved its beachhead inland—it would turn out to be too slow an inward thrust, giving the Germans time to gather strength in their defenses. The ultimate purpose of the landing was to push Germans holding winter line to the north.⁶⁹ A few days later, the VI Corps decided to start its attack. The Rangers were given the objective of taking and holding Cisterna, a bit of a march that required moving under concealment through an open field. Poor intelligence would lead to massacre. The Americans thought they would be going up against defenses—in fact Germany had taken the time they were given by the Americans to set up a counter-attack; the Germans fortified their positions with tanks and were able to use their superior mass to separate the two attacking groups of Rangers, and eventually surround the entire outfit. As they were surrounded, inexperienced Rangers began to surrender and the unit was essentially destroyed.⁷⁰ The failure at Cisterna can teach three theoretical lessons.

(1) Many Rangers had been used as conventional infantrymen. Rangers were used to defend conventional counter-attacks and hold the Winter line just months before their failure at Cisterna. Using the Rangers in this conventional fighting led to heavy attrition—to fill their ranks, the Rangers were forced to use under-trained men from

⁶⁹ King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II*, pp.31-33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 39-41.

conventional units—giving them only a month to train to become SOF-ready before the landing at Anzio.⁷¹ The failure of this battle lends credence to the argument that training is always paramount to SOF. It is easy to see why in total war this training might be compromised—why not use the best soldiers to hold large conventional objectives? If there are casualties among the SOF ranks, due to the nature of total war, it may mean sacrificing eliteness for a semblance of combat-readiness. First, it needs to be made clear that Rangers are not trained for conventional fighting—they are best at and trained for direct action. If too many Rangers are lost, their ranks are filled with soldiers inexperienced in direct action; so when Rangers are given appropriate missions, they have a high chance of failure due to under-training. With the stakes of total war, it is tempting for planners to use SOF conventionally, but it is ultimately detrimental to the war effort.

(2) The problem with these types of missions—where SOF support conventional operations—is that it is easy to mix the two different types of forces together. Especially in total war, their different missions can be confused and sacrificed in an attempt to gain total victory. This situation is one that allowed Rangers to petition for their own headquarters. The failure at Cisterna is one event that has paved the way to the relative organizational autonomy of SOCOMM today. A Ranger Force headquarters was “most important to decide if the missions were proper for the Rangers.”⁷² Organizational autonomy may be needed for SOF; conventional officers simply fail to understand their utility.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 30.

⁷² Major Roy Murray, Letter, “Ranger Infantry Battalions,” 28 November 1943. Cited from King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II*, p. 31.

(3) Large operations in conventional warfare tend to be slow moving. With their small size, SOF rely on speed to make up for mass; as shown in this case, when Rangers are forced to move at the slow pace of their conventional counterparts, their small size catches up with them. This can also be seen as another argument for organizational autonomy—again, conventional leaders in total war are too quick to compromise SOF missions for the supposed aid SOF can give to the overall strategic end.

Zerf is a mission that is in direct contrast with the Battle of Cisterna. Rangers at Zerf, Germany were similarly depleted due to conventional fighting, and yet the combat here from 23-27 February 1945 led to an amazing victory for the Rangers. Conventional units of the Army's X Corps began this attack to force Germans to withdraw and allow Allies to expand control of bridges. The Rangers were given the task of cutting off the German route of withdrawal by infiltrating enemy lines and cutting off the backside of the enemy at Zerf.⁷³ The Rangers assaulted Zerf; at a cost of 90 casualties, they took 328 prisoners and killed 299 enemies.⁷⁴ One very important theoretical lesson is learned from Zerf and separates victory here from defeat at Cisterna.

(1) In cutting off the enemy's backside by infiltrating its lines, the Rangers participated in a large-scale conventional operation that arguably had a large strategic effect on the aim of total victory. The reason that they were victorious here as opposed to Cisterna was that Rangers were allowed to do what they are trained to do with organizational autonomy. SOF must be properly used—here, the special unit separated from the conventional unit, infiltrated enemy lines under concealment, and committed a

⁷³ King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II*, pp. 42-51.

⁷⁴ 5th Ranger Battalion, After Action Report, 10 March 1945. Cited from King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II*, p. 53.

direct assault on an enemy objective—this is a mission for which the Rangers were trained. In total war, it seems like it may be wise to use one's best soldiers conventionally to have the largest strategic effect; without victory, however, there is no strategic gain. As shown by the example of Zerf, the largest strategic gains that an SOF unit can have when assisting conventional forces comes when giving SOF autonomy in granting them the ability to do what they are trained to do.

(3) OSS—Supporting the Allies in France

The OSS had many OGs operating throughout both theaters in World War II. The best group for analysis purposes, however, is 2671st Reconnaissance Battalion operating in France. This group is widely regarded as the fore-runner to Army Special Forces. Additionally, this OG both assisted French resistance forces and helped in Allied invasions of France.

The OGs were created as early as 1941 for the following mission:

The soldiers would not only provide training and material support for the resistance, they would also form the nucleus for local resistance forces who would attack enemy facilities deep behind the lines...training was based on the experience of British commandos. It placed a heavy emphasis on physical training, demolitions, special weapons, and the hit-and-run offensive operational techniques of guerillas.⁷⁵

Unlike the Rangers, the OSS was given nearly complete organizational autonomy, forming their own Headquarters; in France, the OSS was led by the 2677th Headquarters Company. At a point, however, these OSS groups stop having a traditionally military role, and it is thus hard to define all OSS teams as SOF in the military sense. As such, in August 1944, the OGs were separated from the rest of the OSS in France, being designated the Special Reconnaissance Battalion to “distance the purely military OGs

⁷⁵ Ian Sutherland, “The OSS Operational Groups: Origin of Army Special Forces,” *Special Warfare Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June, 2002), p. 2.

from the agents, spies, and saboteurs of the Headquarters Company of the OSS.”⁷⁶ In other words, the military-minded OGs were given their own organizational autonomy within the already relatively isolated OSS.

The role of these groups would now be to train the French resistance, the *Maquis* to disrupt enemy communication and, more importantly, to conduct guerilla operations in an attempt to slow German movement toward a proper defense of Normandy; and, once Operation Overlord began, to help the Allied Forces by pestering the enemy with guerilla attacks.⁷⁷ Jedburghs were multi-national commando teams—OSS OGs would often link with Jedburgh teams to commit such operations. After training in Algiers, the method by which OSS OGs infiltrated France from Northern Africa was by means of jumping—an example of utilization of new technology. Upon entering Germany, the OGs undertook operations until France was freed from German control. By this time, the *Maquis*, directed by OGs, killed 461 Germans, wounded 467, and took 10,021 as prisoners.⁷⁸ Two lessons can be taken from these OGs in terms of the effect of SOF aiding underground resistances to help in a total war effort.

(1) A lesson already learned via the case of the Rangers is that SOF act best when given autonomy—no matter how painful that may be to conventional commanders. While OSS OGs were given a good mission with an effective amount of autonomy, they did not actually begin helping in guerilla raids until they infiltrated France for this purpose in 1944—three years after the creation of OGs. Guerilla operations can hamper an enemy. As these types of operations were new to the United States, however, the U.S. was slow in their implementation. “The unanimous conclusion among the OGs...was

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

that the OSS units were committed much too late to achieve maximum effect on the *Maquis*.⁷⁹ An underground force is generally disorganized, poorly trained, and under equipped. As is evident in today's insurgency in Iraq, however, what guerillas lack in money and training, they make up for with the will to fight—especially when their home is being occupied. Their will to fight is an invaluable tool; without training, however, the strategic effect of these underground fighters is at worst negligible and at best underutilized. By committing time, money, training, and equipment to guerilla forces earlier, the U.S. would have allowed small OGs to act as force multipliers more effectively. By risking very few of its own men as trainers, and mostly French citizens as war-fighters, the U.S. could have set up a risk-assessment situation where there was a sizeable strategic benefit (hampering the Germans and scaring them, which they did, to a certain degree) versus a minimal strategic risk (at most a few hundred Americans). Whereas success of a guerilla campaign could have helped, its failure would not have been a major strategic let-down in terms of total war; in subsequent wars the U.S. will heed this lesson and commit to training guerillas earlier.

(2) The second lesson learned is about the eliteness of an SOF soldier and what that means in terms of his isolation. This lesson is especially poignant in times of training guerilla forces. Many conventional soldiers are outstanding riflemen. Many are outstanding at directing artillery fire. The elite nature of an SOF soldier is oftentimes that, beyond outstanding tactical skills, his mind makes him a valuable weapon. When given as much autonomy as an OSS OG was given, above and beyond the necessary language skills, the isolation of US forces requires that standards are high in terms of strategic understanding of what is happening. The reason that this elite nature, physically

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

and mentally, must be kept especially in times when an SOF soldier is isolated from the conventional army in total war, is that the only contact the leaders of resistance groups had with the United States was the contact the resistance groups had with the OSS men on the ground. Their words and actions become U.S. foreign policy to leaders of an isolated resistance. The most cogent commentary regarding this notion of an isolated SOF soldier in World War II is as follows: “His views had no importance in the eyes of the State Department representatives thousands of miles away, but for the fighters of the underground, they were taken as inspired declarations of Washington’s policy.”⁸⁰ Wrote an OSS colonel serving with the Yugoslav resistance: “Here, I was America.”⁸¹ The SOF soldier on any level, then, needs a knowledge of the strategic implications of his own actions; unlike a normal rifleman, his understanding of war must exceed the tactical level. Minimally, the SOF soldier must have a basic knowledge of a “message” that the U.S. would wish to spread. In subsequent wars, SOF will be used in this isolated manner to spread propaganda.

Conclusions: What Do SOF Mean Now?

In terms of this essay, the study of World War II lends nearly no credence to the assertion that SOF have a larger-than-tactical effect. Indeed, the tactical operations of SOF in WWII did help bring strategic success to the Allies in this war. But as this was a total war, tactical ends are essentially strategic ends. In a situation where the endgame is total military victory, all tactical success is strategic success. In that light, it is difficult to say that special operations were truly able to make a mark on U.S. policy. This paper

⁸⁰ R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 31.

⁸¹ Albert Seitz, *Mihailovic: Hoax or Hero?* (Columbus, OH: Leigh House, 1953), p. 49. Cited from Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency*, p. 31.

seeks to show that SOF, in their tactical successes, provide a one-of-a-kind boost to the United States as it seeks its security and policy goals. SOF were the ugly duckling to the conventional American war-hawk that won total victory. For the most part, SOF in WWII can be characterized as highly specialized conventional soldiers. The fact that all SOF units were deactivated after the war attests to this fact—SOF were deemed useful, perhaps, but not an integral part of a standing military force.

Conventional innovation is a slow-moving machine, including the organizational innovation of incorporation of SOF into the military. The OSS would evolve into the CIA—sabotage and highly covert operations will stay in play. World War II opened the door to the inculcation of SOF into the regular military in highly specialized conventional roles aimed at total victory; it will take the emergence of limited war to bring SOF inside the military establishment and even then the innovation is not complete.

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An Organization Without Organization

After World War II ended and the nuclear age began, the United States was thrust into a high-risk, bi-polar security environment. While many grand strategies would compete for dominance, containment would ultimately become the prevailing security theme of the post-war world. SOF will finally be able to leave their singular mark on a large-scale security policy via containment; alternatively, the nuclear and bi-polar nature of the security scene in this time frame will also put brakes on the use of SOF as a tool of defense policy.

This chapter begins by briefly explaining the grand strategy of containment. After this is accomplished, a section will be devoted to the organizational re-emergence and expansion of SOF and the simultaneous establishment of covert action as a norm among security options from the Truman through the Johnson presidencies. The third section will use the China case as an example of why special operations may not be chosen as a form of action in supporting containment—in other words, rather than SOF supporting grand strategy, it will be shown why grand strategy may limit special operations. Finally, the bulk of the chapter will use the medium-intensity conflicts in Vietnam and Korea to explain new ways SOF were used in support of larger conventional wars and will use low-intensity conflicts (LICs) in The Bay of Pigs and Laos to explain the role of SOF in covertly supporting US grand strategy. It is important, through this section, to recognize various SOF as organizations on the cusp of organizational permanence within the U.S. military at large; even more, it is essential to notice that, as

SOF gain a place in the military establishment, their use as a tool of strategy is marred by organizational inadequacy. In this light, two trends should be evident in the chapter. Leaders increase in their willingness to grant SOF strategic responsibilities; the necessity of an organizational overhaul of SOF grows congruently with the amount of responsibility granted to them.

Containment: A Brief Explanation

This section will serve as a basis from which to expand upon the role of SOF in supporting containment. After this section, which has a focus on merely the ideology of containment, specific policy on singular areas (i.e. Indochina) will be explained as the paper dictates.

Allying with the Russians in order to win World War II has often been referred to as a Faustian agreement—the free world allied with and allowed to expand an empire that threatened its very existence.⁸² “‘Containment,’ the term generally used to characterize American policy toward the Soviet Union during the postwar period, was a series of attempts to deal with that wartime Faustian bargain.”⁸³ George F. Kennan, who came up with the term, broadly described it as a “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansion tendencies.”⁸⁴ It was the job of American policy to counter an ideologically different and aggressive nation that carried on a foreign policy that was “secretive, not frank, [had] a basic unfriendliness of purpose...for the foreseeable future.”⁸⁵ In the end, and especially after the enemy acquired nuclear

⁸² Based on comments made by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. From John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 3.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ X, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, XXV (July, 1947), p. 575. The author of this article was later revealed to be George F. Kennan himself.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 575.

capabilities in 1949 and total war became a zero-sum game where the end could mean the annihilation of a civilization, it was the job of the United States, the only Soviet contemporary, to balance the spread of Soviet communism and ensure the security of the free world. In the nuclear age, military action has to be used very precisely so as to avoid the possibility of all-out war.

In distrusting the Soviets, Americans saw communism not as an ideology but as a means by which the enemy could fulfill its expansionist desires. By 1948, there was a three-part strategy for containment outlined by Kennan. It called for first encouraging self-confidence in Soviet-threatened nations to restore the balance of power; exploiting tension between Moscow and international communist parties to check soviet influence; and finally modifying the Soviet view of international relations with a view toward negotiation. From a military standpoint, the focus was on ensuring that the Soviets could not turn two separate power spheres—Europe and Asia—into a singular part of its empire.⁸⁶ Kennan desired two independent power spheres in Europe and Asia. As such, the primary focus of military actions in this chapter is on checking Soviet expansion into Asia.

What does the strategy generally mean from a military standpoint? The Truman Doctrine, given on 12 March 1947, stated that “It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”⁸⁷ Unless the U.S. sought a total nuclear war with the Soviets, won that war, and thereby drove the Soviets to the bargaining table, the military could not have a direct role in part three of the strategy—negotiating with the Soviets. The military

⁸⁶ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 33-36.

⁸⁷ Stated by President Harry Truman, cited from *Ibid*, p. 22.

was used directly in part one of the strategy in hopes of ultimately indirectly driving the power spheres toward successful democracy; once the economic disparity between the two ideologies was evident, it was hoped that the Soviets would be driven toward part three and open diplomacy. Kennan would describe the role of the military in balancing the Soviets as “making political positions credible, as a deterrent to attack, as a source of encouragement to allies, and, as a last resort, as a means of waging war successfully should it come.” If the Soviet means of expansion was communism, the American means of balance could only be capitalism and democracy; as such, this could not be an *openly* offensive military.⁸⁸ Kennan described three criteria for the intervention of American forces in foreign lands.

“(1)Whether there are any local forces worth strengthening. (2)The importance of the challenged areas to our security. (3)The probable costs of our action and their relation to the results to be achieved.”⁸⁹ The U.S. was tasked to

Develop a level of military readiness which can be maintained as long as necessary as a deterrent to Soviet aggression, as indispensable support to our political attitude toward the USSR, as a source of encouragement to nations resisting Soviet political aggression, and as an adequate basis for immediate military commitments and for rapid mobilization should war prove unavoidable.⁹⁰

As the nuclear age began, it would become vitally important to weigh the opportunity cost of intervention. Military intervention, then, almost exclusively supported part one of Kennan’s strategy—to intervene in support of part two was counterintuitive if Americans thought that communism was ultimately self-destructive; even more, this “purely

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 38.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 39, 40.

⁹⁰ “NSC 20/4: US Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security,” *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) Vol. 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 23 November 1948), pp. 663-669, 21a.

ideological” intervention risked driving teetering communist nations closer to Moscow⁹¹ and to intervene as part of part three could lead to nuclear war. The military was being set up for a long series of limited low and medium-intensity conflicts; in other words, the security situation was one that allowed for the renewal of SOF, and even more, led to a point where SOF were nearly an organizational stalwart in the United States military.

Two Timelines: The Renewal of SOF and the Covert Option

As quickly as World War II saw the onset of operational elements of the OSS and SOF in the military establishment as Rangers were formed, these organizations came to a screeching post-war halt. The OSS became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); operational elements were maintained in that organization, but using them as SOF in terms of military strikes was not considered immediately. Ranger units were dissolved promptly with the end of World War II.⁹² The point here is that while the U.S. did innovate to bring SOF into the operational establishment, it appeared to be a purely wartime innovation. This section details the renewal of SOF in two terms. First, it details the re-birth of special operations specifically within the military. Second, much of the talk of SOF operating in a strategic sense in the containment period dealt with their use covertly; in other words, being able to balance the spread of communism militarily, but being able to do so with as much deniability as possible so as to reap strategic benefit without bruising diplomatic approaches to policy goals. The second timeline, then, discusses the onset of covert operations as a policy alternative for the U.S.

Throughout the section, it will seem like a horrible mistake that at no point is there substantial evidence of an established organizational governing body of all covert or

⁹¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 45.

⁹² King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II*, p. 51.

special operations, and through the operational sections of this chapter, it will seem inconsistent that leadership changes from one special operation to another, even when that operation is conducted within the same service. These illogical gaps are necessary: it is key to note from the onset of this discussion that the lesson this era should teach policy makers and the military establishment alike; and the lesson that they finally do learn down the road in Iran; is that in order to be successful, SOF need an established organization and unity of command. To put it another way: it is nearly more important to note the gaps and inconsistencies in the remainder of the chapter than what is actually written and clearly explained in the remainder of the chapter.

Timeline 1: The Renewal and New Nature of SOF in the Military

In 1952, the United States Army opened the 10th Special Forces Group and in 1953 the 77th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, NC. In 1957 the 1st Special Forces was activated abroad in Okinawa, Japan. In 1961, the 5th Special Forces Group of the 1st Special Forces was activated at Fort Bragg to conduct all operations in Southeast Asia. In the fall of that year, the first president, President Kennedy, to show particular interest in SOF, went to Fort Bragg to review the Special Forces program of the Army. President Kennedy, now the namesake of the Army's Special Warfare Center, would prove to be the high-ranking official that cemented the place of SOF in the military establishment. Rangers, under the same organizational structure as World War II, were activated for the Korean Conflict in the early 1950's; it should be noted, however, that, beyond the already established scope of Rangers, Special Forces were created directly in response to the

situation in Vietnam, which will be discussed in the section on that conflict. By the onset of the Vietnam Conflict, there would be approximately 2,000 SOF troops in Vietnam.⁹³

The Navy also developed a special warfare capability. In World War II, the Navy started Special Service Boats and Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs). In Korea, UDTs would help sabotage Korean shipping and clear underwater mines. In 1962, to give the newly formed Special Forces Groups in the Army a maritime special warfare component, these UDTs were changed into SEALs (Sea, Air, Land Commandos) Teams One and Two.⁹⁴

There are two important points to make about the formation of these SOF groups. First, in every work about the origins of SOF, President Kennedy is credited with having a special interest in this type of warfare.⁹⁵ He saw an intricate security landscape that called for an unconventional warfare capability in Southeast Asia; his desire to meet the needs of the limited and specific conflict in Southeast Asia would lead him to desire unconventional warfare teams. His forward thinking about a singular conflict would lead to the final creation of unconventional warfare as a key component in the armed forces. Second, SOF finally had published doctrine. In Army Field Manual 31-21, Special Forces was defined operationally.

Its role was to assume and carry out any mission assigned to it by the Army. Its missions were many and varied because of its organization, flexible command arrangements, tailored logistical and fiscal procedures, and highly trained men. Chief among them were planning, conducting, and supporting unconventional warfare and internal security or 'stability' operations...They could

⁹³ Department of the Army CMH Publication 90-23, *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1989), pp. 1-17.

⁹⁴ Kevin Dockery and Bill Fawcett, *The Teams: An Oral History of the U.S. Navy SEALs* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), pp. xiii, xiv.

⁹⁵ For examples, see: Dockery and Fawcett, *The Teams*; Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*; Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Many other works on the topic note the President's Interest in SOF.

train and work with others to infiltrate by air, land, or water, sometimes penetrating deep into enemy territory for the purpose of attacking strategic targets, rescuing friendly troops, or collecting intelligence.⁹⁶

There was finally a set of rules for SOF that fell completely outside the scope of conventional forces. It will be important to note, however, that this capability was not in place for the Korean Conflict.

The Covert Timeline

Before it even had the organized military capability, the U.S. would begin exploring covert options to check Soviet expansion. A long series of documents illustrate this exploration. One *FRUS* document summarizes all of this activity, in a “Note on U.S. Covert Action Programs,” detailing the steps each President from Truman through Johnson took to explore, implement, and institutionalize U.S. covert operations.

In Truman’s presidency, NSC 4-A established the CIA as “a branch for peacetime covert action operations...it was an exclusively Executive Branch function...prompted by the Truman administration’s concern over Soviet psychological warfare.”⁹⁷ It was feared that with all of this power, the State Department and Pentagon would become wary of the CIA and develop its own covert establishments. As such, NSC 10/2 superseded 4-A and defined covert operations as those that, “if uncovered, the US government can disclaim any responsibility for them.”⁹⁸ The military, as noted above, would take years to establish forces that provided for clandestine activities and deniability. The CIA, via NSC 10/2, was tasked with

Propaganda; economic warfare; preventive direct action; subversion against hostile states...including support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries of the

⁹⁶ Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: US Army Special Forces 1961-1971*, p. 9.

⁹⁷ “Note on U.S. Covert Action Programs,” *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. XII, p. XXXI.

⁹⁸ “NSC 10/2,” *FRUS*, 1945-1950, *Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment*, 18 June 1948, Doc. 292.

free world. Such operations should not include armed conflict by recognized military forces, espionage or counter-espionage, and cover and deception for military operations.⁹⁹

While the CIA was given the ability to support foreign guerillas covertly, it had no authorization to aid a recognized military, or even commando, force.

Within the CIA organization, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) was tasked with handling all CIA covert action programs. Integrating other elements of the U.S. foreign policy machine, OPC was to take peacetime guidance from the State Department and wartime guidance from the military. NSC 10/5, arising during the Korean Conflict and Truman administration, guaranteed CIA governance over guerilla operations.¹⁰⁰ There was no program of training a special force in order to prepare for war—the operations were planned and executed as threats arose—a problem which would not be quelled until the military establishment of Special Forces in the 1960's.

In 1954, the CIA began to have some of its powers stripped away. Via NSCs 5412, 5412/1, and 5412/2, the approval and management of covert operations was taken from being only the responsibility of the President and Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and the decision-making was broadened to a “Special Group,” which also included the Secretaries of State and Defense, by the end of Eisenhower's presidency.¹⁰¹

After the failure at the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy ensured that, by 1963, there was a set criteria for bringing covert operations to the Special Group, thus ensuring more control from high-level government officials. Before this incident, the DCI determined whether a covert operation should be brought to the attention of the group. The criteria included “Risk, possibility of success, potential for exposure, political

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ “Note on U.S. Covert Action Programs,” *FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. XII*, p. XXXII.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. XXXIII.

sensitivity, and cost (if it was more than \$25,000), for determining whether covert action projects were submitted to the Special Group.”¹⁰² President Kennedy, in addition to the indoctrination of Special Forces into the military, would also form a separate Counter-Insurgency Special Group called “The Special Group C1;” President Johnson would delegate the coordination of these activities to the Secretary of State. Finally, the Name of the Special Group was changed to “Committee 303.” The Special Group and Committee 303 approved 163 covert actions by 1967.¹⁰³

In having covered this exhaustively meticulous section, it must be understood that there is a great disparity in the government as SOF and covert actions gain simultaneous but separate permanence. One group specializes in a strategic end: covert actions aimed at gaining strategic advantages through direct actions against communism with complete deniability. Another establishment focuses on a tactical means: the use of unconventional warfare. In practice, the means will meet the ends in the time period discussed here; until the means and the ends meet organizationally, however, it will be very difficult for SOF to help the United States attain strategic goals. As discussion follows of special operations that were explored, but not utilized, and both explored and utilized, it should be recognized that with correct organization, there would have been more opportunity to use SOF in situations where they were not; when they were used, a more insightful organization could have led to greater strategic success.

Kennedy’s Overall Significance

The Kennedy administration, it seems, is the one that finally pushed for organizational innovation in the military. The reason for this push can be attributed to the

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. XXXIV.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, pp. XXXIV, XXXV.

views of containment on the military establishment and Kennedy's keen interpretation of those views.

As containment sought only to limit the spread of Soviet communism, it would immediately appear that there must be a means to fight small wars—in the time before Kennedy's administration, however, there was no standing mechanism by which to accomplish this task. As the military remained largely conventional, the United States only kept an asymmetric deterrent threat—it was all-out nuclear warfare or nothing. The United States had limited security goals with only a large-scale military to give those goals force.

President Kennedy finally gave an accurate description of what the military would mean in a security situation dictated by the grand strategy of containment.

In Southeast Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere in the Third World, the emerging threat was communist guerilla warfare. This would define the conflict between the East and West, and the United States needed to prepare for it...Kennedy came to see 'special warfare' as the way to counter guerillas.¹⁰⁴

Whereas previous administrations were only able to rely on massive retaliation as a military deterrent, Kennedy ardently disagreed with this policy and sought to change it. It was simply not a credible deterrent to attack a small guerilla uprising, as containment needed to, with a nuclear and large conventional threat. It would not deter; making the threat credible through action would lead to tremendous pitfalls; the strategic risk was far too great. It is like killing a fly with a flame thrower. Rather than burn his house down over a small pest, Kennedy decided to invent the fly-swatter. He stated that

Events in Indochina and elsewhere have already knocked the props out from the assumptions of massive retaliation; and our reduction of strength for resistance in brushfire or guerilla wars, while threatening atomic retaliation, has in effect invited expansion by the communists in areas such as

¹⁰⁴ Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), pp. 3,4.

Indochina through those techniques which they deem not sufficiently offensive to induce us to risk atomic warfare.¹⁰⁵

The counter-intuitive nature of massive retaliation not only did not protect the U.S.; it decreased security by allowing communist expansion. Special Warfare would provide the U.S. with a logical and symmetrical deterrent to guerilla communist expansion in allowing the U.S. to act on its security concerns.

Kennedy's inculcation of the unconventional capability—and his reasoning for that inculcation—will have the unintended but positive effect that SOF are able to assist the US in its limited escalation objectives in a medium-intensity conflict; it had the ability to infiltrate commandos into Laos during Vietnam without a major escalation of the main conflict and without compromising (in fact helping greatly) its main security concerns. It had the direct effect of being able to isolate guerilla communist threats as in the first conflict in Laos.

As the next section explains, there were large security concerns that weighed heavily on the reluctance to enter mainland China; but the fact that the capability of a low-escalation or unconventional force did not exist also contributed to the United State's inability to reach its security goals in China with respect to the Korean War.

Not Using SOF: The China Case

The United States would flirt with two opportunities to use SOF in a major strategic role in China. In the first case, SOF would have been used to deter the entrance of or mitigate the effect of Chinese fighters in the Korean Conflict. In the second case,

¹⁰⁵ John F. Kennedy, *A Compilation of Speeches During His Service in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), pp. 1002, 1003 cited from Shultz, *The Secret War Against Hanoi*, p. 5.

SOF would have been used to take out Chinese nuclear sites and thereby delay the nation's entrance into the nuclear club.

Minimal Escalation in Korea

When the United States crossed the 38th Parallel into North Korea, the Chinese entered the war, attacking U.S. forces. This happened because of misread intentions: as the United States crossed the parallel—the U.S. thought it was transparent in letting the Chinese know that it did not wish to threaten Chinese security or hydroelectric power from the Yalu River—it was supposedly clear in maintaining that attacking North Korea was not a springboard to attacking a communist China. But the signaling was, in fact, muddled—the United States failed to recognize that China sought only to maintain the very limited aim that the U.S. was attempting to achieve—China sought the upholding of North Korea's communist government while the United States' only policy goal was to destroy that government. As the war progressed, America expanded its aims, but remained limited by three essential factors: to avoid large amounts of civilian destruction, to avoid a spillover war into China or Russia, and to leave Chinese vital interests unharmed.¹⁰⁶

Various options were discussed in an attempt to deter the Chinese from entering the war and thus allow the U.S. to achieve its policy goal of eliminating a communist government on the Korean peninsula without expansion of the war: all of these attempts would ultimately fail, and the U.S. would eventually sign a treaty returning to the *status quo ante-bellum*. Within the war itself, President Truman's camp believed that China was provoked by MacArthur's charge into North, threatening the security of the Yalu and

¹⁰⁶ Morton H. Halperin, "The Korean War," *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, 6th Edition, ed. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 181-196.

Manchuria. The Truman camp believed in a deterrence theory of “reassurance.” The MacArthur side believed China entered because they were not threatened by air strikes. The MacArthur argument is labeled by the deterrence theory of “credibility of threat.”¹⁰⁷ Neither method of deterrence worked in stopping a Chinese entrance into the war: reassurance misread Chinese aims and U.S. limited aims disallowed the large-scale strategic bombing of Manchuria that MacArthur sought.

Could SOF have been used as an intermediary escalator or to launch a threatening strike into China before a charge into North Korea? The U.S. did not want the complete escalation of strategic bombing in Manchuria any more than it wanted the unchecked use of Chinese supply lines and troops in supporting North Koreans. Could a commando raid have been used to send a limited signal, or at least do significant damage to supply lines? The answer, of course, is no. Today, SOF are used as signalers in limited warfare.¹⁰⁸ Then, this was not even a possibility. In asking why not, this case demonstrates three relevant facts: first, the United States will not take on a covert operation unless it has a certain level of deniability. A commando raid, if it did any damage, would necessarily be attributed to U.S. forces. Second, the United States will not risk war with a major security threat like China or Russia for the sake of a small commando raid. Third, if U.S. grand strategy even allowed for a commando raid to take place here, the state of unconventional warfare capabilities in the U.S. was in such disarray as to make success highly doubtful.

Via NSC Directives 4/A and 10/2, paramilitary and covert operations fell under the responsibility of the CIA. The CIA, by these directives, would claim responsibility

¹⁰⁷ Thomas J. Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao’s Korean War Telegrams,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer, 1992), pp. 122-154.

¹⁰⁸ This will be discussed in the next chapter.

for unconventional warfare as well; as an Army Special Operations Command was fashioned for Korea in the same light as that of World War II, a bureaucratic battle ensued: the Army had the capability to take on larger scale strategic special operations, but did not have the responsibility to train for these missions in peacetime. The CIA had peacetime control of covert and unconventional warfare operations without the numbers or scale to use these tools to an extent that would provide a strategic advantage in a conflict the size of that in Korea.¹⁰⁹ One organization possessed capabilities, while the other possessed the clearance to make those capabilities actionable. Special operations into China were so minimal, in fact, that literally only one CIA operative penetrated into the mainland of Manchuria.¹¹⁰

Neither SOF nor the bureaucracy that controlled them were prepared to allow these forces to act in an isolated manner as signalers in a limited, medium-intensity conflict. It is a starting point and it will starkly contrast with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At one point, SOF were not even considered as signalers, whereas today they are a primary option in serving this strategic function.

Stopping Chinese Proliferation

Over a decade after the Korean Conflict, the Chinese tested an atomic weapon. Before the weapon was attained, several options were discussed in halting Chinese proliferation. A covert commando raid either joint with the Taiwanese or isolated employing U.S. agents on Chinese nuclear sites were discussed as options. The fact that

¹⁰⁹ Major Steven A. Fondacaro, "A Strategic Analysis of U.S. Special Operations during the Korean Conflict 1950-1953," Master's Thesis to U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1988), p. 47.

¹¹⁰ William B. Breuer, *Shadow Warriors: The Covert War in Korea* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), p.97.

SOF were seriously discussed as a counter-proliferation measure is a testament to their maturation since the end of Korea.

President Kennedy, the man who ensured the indoctrination of special operations into the U.S. military machine, seriously thought about the possibility of such an operation. He discussed with Chinese Nationalist General Chiang Chung-kuo “whether it would be possible to send 300 to 500 men by air to...atomic installations.” CIA officials deemed such a mission as realistic.¹¹¹ Both the CIA and the Pentagon looked into the paramilitary option of attack to the extent that a failed U-2 spy plane mission was sent out to gather intelligence on the Chinese nuclear facility at Baotou to see if it was able to be attacked.¹¹²

Ultimately, it was determined that no military action was advisable—even if successful, it would only delay the Chinese nuclear program a few years, and could have provoked a highly undesirable war with the Chinese.¹¹³ Still, a covert commando operation was discussed as a middle ground of force escalation; if the United States could have maintained deniability in destroying Chinese nuclear facilities, it may have done so.

Commando operations were specifically ruled out for two reasons. First, an attack by agents within China was nixed because the capability did not exist. Second, Taiwanese commandos dropped by Americans on Chinese facilities were a possibility, but such a raid provided the U.S. with no more deniability than a conventional strike

¹¹¹ Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Edward Rice to Ambassador Ting-Fu Tsiang, 14 October 1963, cited from William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960-64,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter, 1989), p. 73.

¹¹² Burr and Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby Cradle,’” p. 75.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

would have.¹¹⁴ In assessing risk, it made no sense to make war with China a possibility over a few hundred commandos. In a larger sense, it made no sense for the United States to risk war with a near-nuclear nation when it held the largest nuclear threat. Why provoke war over a few hundred commandos whose effect may be negligible when nuclear weapons themselves could provide the stability that is sought. Proliferation was not the worst alternative; accidental war with a major security threat was. Special operations forces, especially when they are supposed to operate covertly, should never risk war with a high-level security threat.

SOF Alone: The Opportunity for Isolated Strategic Special Operations

The United States would not use commandos or conventional forces to attack a high-risk, nuclear security threat: it just did not make sense and could lead to an unwanted high-intensity conflict. The U.S. would, however, intervene in its strategy to contain the spread of communism; it was willing to risk medium-intensity conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. In both of these conflicts, SOF were used. In Korea, there were no important commando raids into China, but SOF were regularly used to go beyond the 48th parallel into North Korea in hopes of cutting off supply lines and to collect intelligence on the Chinese border.¹¹⁵ By Vietnam, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and CIA had expanded their respective special warfare programs. Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRPs) and Navy SEALs specialized in unconventional warfare, allowing the U.S. to bring a guerilla war to the North Vietnamese; additionally, SOF had an expanded search

¹¹⁴ George Rathjens, "Destruction of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Capabilities," 14 December 1964, p. 70, cited from Burr and Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby Cradle,'" p. 75.

¹¹⁵ For a discussion of these operations, see Michael E. Haas, *In the Devil's Shadow: UN Special Operations during the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000).

and rescue role and were utilized, at times, to go behind enemy lines to assassinate Vietnamese officers.

In both of these conflicts, the role of SOF continued to be expanded. But when the aim is not total victory, it is difficult to argue that the tactical successes of SOF had strategic effects. Just as in World War II, battles were fought, won, and lost on the conventional level. Neither of the two medium-intensity conflicts in Asia allows SOF to put its singular mark on U.S. strategy.

Vietnam is more important for analyzing the role of SOF in medium-intensity conflict not in the conflict in Vietnam proper, but in proxy conflicts in Southeast Asia. For various reasons, it will be shown that the U.S., thanks to a newfound unconventional warfare capability, was able to enter another country (Laos) to serve its security goals without escalating the main conflict. Indeed, part of the reason for this is that Laos was not a major player like China was, but it is an important instance of use of force without escalation.

In purely low-intensity conflicts, the United States, and particularly its Executive Branch, would attempt to utilize isolated SOF to meet security goals and serve U.S. grand strategy. The areas of operation focused on here will be the Bay of Pigs and two conflicts in Laos. The United States was not prepared to allow SOF to operate directly against major security threats like China. It was, however, ready to use these forces to fight proxy wars that contributed to U.S. grand strategy and helped to mitigate larger security threats. The success of these respective operations will range from absolute failure to partial success.

The Bay of Pigs: Small Conflict, Big Failure

In 1959, Fidel Castro began his takeover of Cuba. As stated in the Truman Doctrine, the United States would support forces that sought to contain communist takeovers in their nations. In this way, the CIA, under President Eisenhower, began to train guerilla exiles from Cuba in Guatemala, beginning plans for an attack and attempted overthrow of Castro's government. The CIA developed a plan whereby an amphibious attack by guerillas, including air-strikes by exile pilots, would spark a general uprising in Cuba and an overthrow of Castro's government "within a matter of weeks."¹¹⁶ SOF were supposed to be utilized, in training Cuban exiles, to aid the grand strategy goal of containing communism.

As sure as the CIA was in the success of a possible attack, the military was highly doubtful. Kennedy would not allow U.S. personnel to attack Cuba in the first place, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff doubted the operation would be successful—in this way, the CIA was forced to strongly push its agenda: in the ongoing bureaucratic war for control of special operations, the CIA would become attached to pushing a cause that most unbiased experts deemed to have only minimal chance of success.¹¹⁷

The CIA wanted support from the U.S. military, desiring commandos to assist in the ground raid. Kennedy, however, would not budge from his stance on not allowing U.S. ground troops to invade Cuba.¹¹⁸ The operation failed when, after initial air strikes a few days before the invasion, Washington would not allow air strikes to happen on the day of the invasion. Kennedy changed the invasion plan on the day of, and the Cuban

¹¹⁶ Christian Herter, "Current Basic United States Policy Toward Cuba," 5 November 1959, cited from Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options*, p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options*, pp. 20-26

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 28.

Air Force, though it only had twelve planes, was able to destroy the invading force. Had the air strikes even been allowed, the mission still would have failed due to a lack of surprise and adequate intelligence. A CIA Information Report on 6 April 1961 stated that a “Great mass” of Cubans had some disdain for Castro’s regime and that “It [was] generally believed that the Cuban Army [had] been successfully penetrated by opposition groups and that it [would] not fight in the event of a showdown.”¹¹⁹ This intelligence assessment proved to be way off base.

Lucien S. Vandenbroucke points out three reasons that this mission failed. First, though the executive has direct control over covert special operations, he cannot abuse this power and overrule on-site commanders, as Kennedy did in canceling D-Day air strikes. Second, the executive cannot allow an agency to feel such an attachment to a cause that it engages in “wishful thinking” to the point that it hides information that disagrees with its plans. Such was the case with the CIA in the Bay of Pigs incident. Third, competing organizations must be used to check one another by giving more than one organization a vested interest in strategic special operations. In removing the military completely from this operation, Kennedy effectively quieted what would have been valuable criticism of the operation.¹²⁰

Though he received poor intelligence, it is still evident that Kennedy had goals a bit too high for SOF—an operation of this scale may be feasible in today’s security environment, but it was not in the time of Kennedy. It was certainly a mistake to even go ahead with the operation, especially in the doubtful manner in which Kennedy decided to run it. It is a testament to the primitive nature of the operation that the means to wage a

¹¹⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Information Report on Cuba,” 6 April 1961, pp. 1-2.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-167.

guerilla attack—the military’s special warfare capability—was completely excluded from the organization that oversaw paramilitary actions in the area of operation. Because of a lack of organizational foresight, the mission was always doomed to fail.

Moreover, the Bay of Pigs can be seen as an over-reliance on SOF. It is an amazing capability. An Executive may feel that he can rely so easily on these amazing groups of soldiers that he fails to properly assess the risk of failure. The mission was doomed to fail, and Kennedy may have been so blinded by the ease with which he could use SOF that he improperly assessed the risk involved.

Hotfoot and White Star: Covert Successes in Laos

As France was losing influence in Southeast Asia, a power vacuum was created that the Soviet Union was more than happy to exploit. In Laos, a microcosm of events in the whole area, Souvanna Phouma was the heir apparent to the Laotian throne. A communist army, the Pathet-Lao, and a neutralist army under Kong Le formed an alliance. They had begun to threaten the status-quo Laotian government, specifically beginning to take over the eastern half of the country in the Plain of Jars. Failure in this intervention by the U.S. would come via its support of a right-wing government and the loss of neutralists to the communist side.

Meanwhile, two communist factions, the Chinese and the U.S.S.R., fought for communist control of the power vacuum. In appeasing North Vietnamese and Laotian communists, the Soviets began extending aid to the Pathet-Lao and neutralists. “The U.S.S.R. capped its persuasive efforts by initiating airlift from North Vietnam to the pro-Communist forces fighting the ‘imperialists’ in Laos.”¹²¹ Through the Vietnam Conflict,

¹²¹ Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 181.

Russian communist influence would grow proportionately larger in North Vietnam and Laos.

Americans had a relatively hands-off system in place in Laos, only observing the situation lightly via its supposedly-civilian (the group consisted of several civilians and a few covert operators) Program Evaluation Office. As communist influence grew in the area, however, the U.S. strategy of containment dictated a more hands-on approach to keep the status-quo. In this light, the United States did not seek to ruffle feathers by giving overt and unfettered support to the *Armée Nationale de Laos* while the French military was still supposedly running the show there. As such, the U.S. negotiated with the French to allow the PEO to enter Laos as a civilian watchdog. The first SOF mission into Laos, codenamed Hotfoot, would include a small battalion of Army Special Forces from the 1st Special Forces in Okinawa entering Laos under the auspices of civilian aides to the French effort as members of the PEO.¹²² Why compromise the status-quo sought by U.S. strategy when it was possible for U.S. policy-makers to pin all external military involvement onto the French?

Though the Phoumist Nationals were not the most desirable government in Laos, they were the best alternative to the Pathet-Lao communists. In its attempt at containment, this intervention in Hotfoot allowed the U.S. to set up a relationship with anti-communist Laotian elements by appeasing one of their needs. The French, after the incident at Dien-Bien Phu in Vietnam, were no longer a military factor in Southeast Asia. As a result, Phoumists ardently sought the help of a U.S. SOF mobile training team

¹²² Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Green Berets in the Vanguard: Inside Special Forces 1953-1963* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 88.

(MTT)—the Green Beret battalion sent in as “civilians.”¹²³ Small amounts of Army SF would train Laotian Nationalists and accompany them on a limited number of missions through 1961; Washington was still hesitant to allow further expansion of a yet unproven unconventional capability. Furthermore, the U.S., via the PEO and the State Department sought a strategically favorable diplomatic solution between Phoumists and the Pathet Lao. As such, U.S. forces in Laos through 1961 carried out a number of low-profile, mostly training missions.¹²⁴ Successful unconventional warfare hinges upon a trust between SOF personnel and indigenous forces—this relationship would be built in Hotfoot and utilized in the next phase of the Laotian operation—White Star.

The French were not getting anything done, and a more aggressive President Kennedy sought to respond to what he felt was a severe communist pressure coming from North Vietnam. He would escalate the conflict covertly via the insertion of 400 SF warriors into Laos, replacing the PEO presence altogether, in the form of White Star MTTs. Washington still sought a diplomatic solution, but as this became a decreasing possibility, a more hands-on approach involving direct action in conjunction with unconventional warfare was sought by Kennedy.¹²⁵ More importantly, SOF were now the sole military extension of the U.S. policy of containment in Laos.

In addition, Laos provided a good grounds from which Kennedy could expand his new definition of symmetric unconventional warfare in containment. The Bay of Pigs was a horrible failure for his vision, and Laos provided a hedge to his possible embarrassment. It was a clandestine mission with only 400 soldiers—any defeat would

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-113.

¹²⁵ Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 59.

be kept relatively quiet, while any victory could be used as evidence of unconventional success in policy circles. SOF were needed, in the context of this administration, because sending in more troops than the 400 in Laos would have increased Kennedy's fear of another horrible debacle like that faced in Cuba.¹²⁶

The White Star teams acted until 1962's Geneva Agreements concerning Laotian neutrality, when the military side of the program ended (the CIA was constantly involved in Laos). The major strategic contribution of the SF teams was in building up the neutralist army in Laos. This involved working with one specific tribe—the Meo—commanded by Vang Pao and armed by the CIA. The U.S. plan was two-fold: it involved building a guerilla force; that force would be coaxed into trustworthiness via a civil affairs campaign. The Green Berets, as part of Mission Hotfoot, directed the Meo to “Evacuate and move to seven mountain sites surrounding the Plain of Jars, each of which had been selected because of its strategic potential for threatening a major enemy supply route.”¹²⁷ 100,000 people would come to these sites, where the hungry refugees were well-fed and supplied by Agency for International Development Flights by Air America¹²⁸—the only overt part of what was an essentially military strategic move.

By the time Hotfoot became White Star, Meo guerillas, in their strategic sites, and trained and aided by elite U.S. forces, were able to successfully battle the Pathet Lao forces¹²⁹; while men were fighting, families became increasingly dependent on the “altruistic” food shipments of the U.S. The Meo, trusting the U.S., fought very well.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹²⁹ Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, p. 184.

The success of this mission can be judged in the success of reaching its end. The U.S. did not want to completely destroy the Pathet-Lao and it could not because they also had neutralist support; the U.S.S.R. would not give up its support of communist Laotians, and as such, the U.S. returned to its grand strategy of finding a peaceable agreement that stopped only the *further spread* of communism. “The American objective was to keep the Mekong Valley out of Pathet-Lao control...and consolidating a bargaining position vis-à-vis the Communist bloc in the increasingly likely event of a new international conference.”¹³⁰ The goal of White Star was to create a military threat to deter the Pathet Lao that was credible enough to gain a favorable diplomatic agreement with Moscow. Army SF, in this case, were the tools of U.S. grand strategy. When official agreements were reached in 1962, “Meo forces reached a strength of 14,000 to 18,000 men, thus making them roughly equivalent to the Pathet-Lao forces and twice as large as Kong Le’s army.”¹³¹ By the end of the agreements, the United States formally had a relatively neutral tri-party arrangement in Laos and an army with stockpiles of weapons in the Meo that favored U.S. wishes to the point of still fighting a border insurgency with the Pathet-Lao in American interest.¹³² The mission, on a base level, was successful in that Laos was not yet a communist nation.

Theoretically, the missions in Laos have four implications. The first three can be expounded from President Kennedy’s remarks on Laos made in 1961. Stressing the importance of the mission, Kennedy stated that “The security of all of Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹³¹ Adams and McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 185.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

of us all.”¹³³ After acknowledging the threat grew after Soviet intervention, he at no point admits to American intervention, instead saying only that “I want to make it clear to the American people, and to all the world, that all we want in Laos is peace, not war...a settlement concluded at the conference table, not the battlefield.”¹³⁴

These remarks bring forth the following points on the use of SOF to support a foreign policy. First, as acknowledged by Jay, Madison, and Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers*, democracies are bad at foreign policy. In the context of the cold war, the U.S.S.R. did not have to reconcile harsh foreign policy moves with its people; even more, Stalin did not have governmental checks on military decisions. In keeping the military intervention a secret, Kennedy mitigated the strategic advantage possessed by a dictatorship in military decisions. In making a high-level decision to send in Army SF, Kennedy avoided the democratic problems of informing the people and likewise avoided bureaucratic checks on military decisions. It also levels the playing field in an ability to covertly support guerillas—a symmetric response to Soviet intervention. Second, a covert option gives the executive a mechanism to push a personal agenda. Kennedy wanted one thing: a symmetric response to communist guerilla warfare; so he pushed unconventional warfare. Kennedy *needed* another thing to push his unconventional agenda: a positive but widely deniable (to the public and the geopolitical world) outcome after the failure at the Bay of Pigs. Third, in this situation, a conventional intervention, and the escalation of force that this would have signified, was highly undesirable. In the context of limited warfare, then, SF were used as a delicate but lethal signaler; Green Berets were used as a middle ground of escalation in between purely diplomatic and

¹³³ President John F. Kennedy’s Statement on Laos, 23 March 1961. The full text of the speech is printed in Adams and McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp. 393-397.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 395.

purely conventional military responses. The State Department, and its ambassador to Laos, Averell Harriman, wanted only a diplomatic approach, “But Kennedy’s strategy was to combine the Pentagon’s force with Harriman’s conciliation.”¹³⁵ SOF allowed the U.S. to simultaneously offer the carrot and the stick—at once it solves the disparity held between MacArthur’s “credible threat” and Truman’s “reassurance” in Korea by allowing the tempered use of both inducements to drive the opposition to the bargaining table.

The final implication here is indirect. In establishing an unconventional presence in Southeast Asia, the United States was able to build relationships with pro-American indigenous factions. In leaving this footprint in the area, the United States set itself up to deal with future security concerns in Southeast Asia. Though happenstance in this instance, it is the first time that SOF were used proactively and not reactively. This result of unconventional warfare would greatly aid the United States two years after Operation White Star was finished and it needed Vang Pao’s guerilla force to help out again in Laos.

The “Vietnam Laos”: Escalate the Force not the Conflict

From 1964 to 1972, the covert paramilitary campaign operating in areas concerning the Vietnam Conflict was controlled by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam’s Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG or simply SOG). The teams run by SOG, which encompassed the entire breadth of the Kennedy-initiated unconventional warfare capability, conducted various missions to counter the North Vietnamese Communist influence in Southeast Asia. For the purposes of this section, only one will be discussed:

¹³⁵ Adams and McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 161.

Cross-border covert reconnaissance operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail by U.S.-led indigenous teams to disrupt the movement of North Vietnamese Army supplies and troops by identifying targets for air strikes, snatching or capturing enemy soldiers, wiretapping lines of communication, and distributing psywar materials.¹³⁶

The theoretical implication discussed, then, is that, unlike in Korea, the United States was able to meet strategic and diplomatic ends by escalating force by intervening in another nation bordering the central conflict without further escalating the conflict itself. In this section, the first part asks why the U.S. intervened here and not in China a decade earlier followed by a brief explanation of the SOF campaign in Laos during the Vietnam Conflict; then the limitations on and failures of that campaign will be discussed; finally there will be a discussion of how to change those failures.

To begin, it must first be asked why the United States intervened here and did not intervene in China during the Korean Conflict. The United States will not invade a top-level security threat covertly or overtly—the risk is too much. Even had the covert mission in Laos been found out, the diplomatic fallout would not have been too great, and in the end it would not matter, as both South Vietnam and Laos would ultimately become communist states. Furthermore, because of White Star, U.S. SOF already had a basis of operation in Laos, something it did not possess in Manchuria. Finally, the capability simply existed during the Vietnam Conflict whereas it did not during the Korean War to carry out a large-scale covert paramilitary operation.

The operations of SOG in Laos lasted from 1964-1972 and carried two names at different times: “Shining Brass” and “Prairie Fire.” The primary SOF source utilized here was Army SF. The field organization specifically in charge of Laotian cross-border operations was OP 35. To execute an operation, a team usually crossed the border with

¹³⁶ Shultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi*, p. xi.

three Army SF personnel and nine indigenous guerillas.¹³⁷ The reason for the missions was simple: the North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh Trail, part of which ran through Laos, to move soldiers and supplies in between North and South Vietnam. It was a strategic imperative to stop unfettered use of the trail by the enemy. The original plan called for three phases.

First, recon teams would be infiltrated into Laos to identify NVA headquarters, base camps, and supply caches. Once found, they would be attacked by air strikes. Phase two involved the deploying of company-size units cross-border to execute strikes against NVA facilities uncovered by recon teams. Finally, indigenous tribesmen in the areas surrounding the trail would be organized into resistance cadres for long-duration operations against the NVA...Phase three was a replay of White Star.¹³⁸

Phase three was necessary because Pathet-Lao and NVA controlled the areas surrounding the trail.

Ultimately, these missions would not be completely successful. The reason for this is organizational limitation. The Ambassador to Laos was now William Sullivan. Under the misguided authorization of the President, he essentially carried veto power over operations in his area of operations; and he used the power, not approving third-phase direct action operations for four years. Sullivan imposed many limits on operations that he did approve: SF could not infiltrate more than 20 kilometers into Laos or more than ten by helicopter. Operations initially needed to be planned 30 days in advance; after some success, SOF had that decreased to a week and ultimately 48 hours. The chain of command for approval of the original thirty-day operational plan was as follows: General Westmoreland→Pacific Command→Office of the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) in the Pentagon in coordination with White House, CIA, Department of State and Defense→Ambassador Sullivan, who

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 222.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 224.

possessed final veto power. Furthermore, whenever conventional units needed help in important engagements, as in the Tet Offensive in 1968, OP 35 was essentially shut down to aid conventional units, a mistake made in World War II. Only the great success of SF teams would help lift any of these limitations.¹³⁹ Operations in Laos ended a tactical success; but they were a strategic failure congruent to that in Vietnam.

The point is this: the need for and the capability of SOF now existed. The proper understanding of the force, however, was not yet realized. The capability was there, and yet the military refused to effectively develop it; “Kennedy’s edict [of unconventional warfare] challenged everything the mainstream military stood for.”¹⁴⁰ In the innovation of SOF, then, there seems to be an impasse. The capability was now very large, and could have been be very successful; there was even a command linked directly to SOF and a President that pushed their inculcation into the mainstream.

President Kennedy understood the role SOF could play in supporting U.S. grand strategy. He could not mandate, however, that the Pentagon properly understand this role. Innovation usually takes generations. Young officers must be taught over a generation until they can implement change as senior officers. Senior military officers are often bullheaded to a change in doctrine.¹⁴¹ Young officers, the ones running SOF operations in Laos and other proxies to Vietnam, will be the ones that must bring the proper understanding of SOF to the conventional military. Until then, their role will be trivialized by misuse in major conflicts.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-257.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁴¹ Stephen Peter Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer, 1988), p. 136.

In project White Star, Kennedy, an innovator, and his successor, President Johnson, had essential control. In the Vietnam Conflict, the military and State Department were given control of SOF. In this act, SOF were doomed to be misused.

Conclusion

SOF evolved in this era from an absolute absence of consideration to a point where U.S. policy makers were not afraid to utilize them in operations directly linked to the nation's strategic goals. SOF were called on during the cold war to escalate force in the very limited way that only such a small and elite group could. In assessing why none of these operations can be categorized as an unqualified success, one of two conclusions must be reached: strategic goals may be outside the scope of SOF and the asset should be relegated to purely tactical missions; or there is a reason that these operations were never completely successful that can be fixed.

In subscribing to the second alternative (as this paper will), it is important to note that each of the operations explained in this chapter involved several organizations both within and outside of the U.S. bureaucracy, each with its own leaders and organizations—SOF had no unity of command. While this certainly led to failures, the nature of the problem did not lead to an actionable solution. In each situation, competing organizations were able to blame one another for failures. Normally in the United States, the President is ultimately held responsible for military operations whether they be successes or failures. In these cases, however, the actions were largely hidden from the public eye; as such the President (with the Bay of Pigs being an exception) maintained his own deniability, thereby allowing no one to be held accountable as a basis for change.

SOF have the ability to take on strategic security objectives alone, but it will ultimately take an extremely embarrassing and public failure to bring about the changes that will make success in these operations possible and complete the generations-long innovation of SOF—neither that deep a failure nor that strong a change happened in this era of special operations. SOF were, however, finally isolated from the conventional framework under the innovative, though at times misled, guidance of President Kennedy and tasked with taking on objectives directly linked to grand strategy in White Star. The era as a whole was an important step in the evolution of strategic special operations, but a step that will lead to an unqualified failure—the very failure requisite to make successful strategic special operations possible.

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SOF in the Carter and Reagan Administrations: Establishing the Modern Context

SOF had a hard time finding their way within the framework of the military at large. The special operations capability, which by 1972 had existed organizationally for thirty year, was still not a full and functioning part of the United States military as the cold war entered its final stages.

This chapter deals with special operations in the years from the end of the Vietnam Conflict through the end of Reagan's Presidency; it outlines, historically and theoretically, the final stages of the integration of special operations into the United States military. It explains what events and strategic conditions necessitated an autonomous and unified SOF organization. In that way, it will establish a framework through which it is possible to analyze special operations up until the present and into the future.

From Vietnam to Desert One

This section describes the direction of special operations from the end of the Vietnam Conflict up to, but not including, the defining catastrophe of SOF in the failed hostage rescue in Iran. The trajectory of events can be seen as the set-up for hostage rescue failure. The set-up had two parts. First, the United States, in this time period, refused to look beyond any security threat with the exception of an all-out war with the Soviet Union, and thus pushed aside any military capabilities beyond the large-scale and conventional. Second, even when the U.S did decide to create a small, elite force to deal

with low-level threats, that force was improperly conceived; a small case study of the inception of Delta Force in the late 1970s will shed light on this part of the failure.

Much like after World War II, SOF were virtually eliminated from the Department of Defense following the end of major fighting in Southeast Asia. By the mid-1970s, special operations were reduced by 70% in personnel and 95% in funding.¹⁴² The reason for this is an inherent contradiction in girding for small-scale threats in the bipolar context of the cold war. There is an opportunity cost involved: preparing for small wars would reduce the capability to deal with large-scale wars. After the Vietnam War, then, “For a variety of political reasons, soldiers and statesmen [found] it easiest to justify force procurement aimed at deterring, or at least containing, Soviet aggression.”¹⁴³ It would seem illogical for the U.S. to prepare for a tiny threat while its main enemy posed a gargantuan threat.

The contradiction, however, is more complicated than it seems. While the U.S.S.R. posed the gravest threat to the U.S., a tactical study of the cold war “Suggests that armed conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union [was] the *least* likely contingency America [faced].”¹⁴⁴ In all cold war-era conflicts, the U.S. and the Soviets went to great lengths to avoid direct fighting, as exhibited in Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. On a strategic level, the Soviet Union was able to further its political cause by supporting anti-U.S. regimes; a failure to recognize the major strategic threat posed by small-scale tactical threats will be manifest later by the situation in Iran.

¹⁴² Colonel William G. Boykin, “Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Legislation: Why Was it Passed and Have the Voids Been Filled?” (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1991), p. 6. *cited from* Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 58.

¹⁴³ Eliot A. Cohen, “Constraints on America’s Conduct of Small Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn, 1984), p. 152.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

The capability of a small, elite force, however, was pushed onto the United States by outside events, senior former-SOF officers, and, as per usual in the world of SOF innovation, the urging of the U.S. executive. The second part of the imminent failure in Iran, then, deals with the improper building of the capability. The inception of Delta Force, in itself, was misdirected. It was indeed an innovation in the U.S. military pantheon, but as a group, the military was responsive, not innovative.

Three kinds of influence would come together in the late 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to force the capability of that elite force. First were human influences: SOF had civilian advocates; supporters within operational ranks; and finally, some senior officers that saw the necessity of a peacetime special operations force but would give these forces no more than a gentle push. Lieutenant General Sam Wilson, for instance, “Was one of the few senior officers who believed that the critical weakness in American military capabilities was the inability to respond to conflicts other than World War III.”¹⁴⁵ But there were not yet any high-ranking officials willing to justify the necessity of the SOF capability. The assistant deputy chief of staff of the Army in the late seventies, and eventually the Chief of Staff in 1979, was General Edward Charles Meyer. Throughout his career, Meyer had worked with and was a gentle advocate for SOF. Even he, however, could not justify much spending on a low-level capability in the face of total war with the Soviets. “General Meyer knew there was little interest in the Department of Defense for rebuilding a special operations capability.”¹⁴⁶ So it took outside motivators to establish an elite force. The second influence, then, was public outcry from outside

¹⁴⁵Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), p. 58. World War III refers to an all-out conventional, nuclear, and thermonuclear war with the Soviets.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

events. “Television coverage of events such as the 1972 Olympics, when Arab terrorists murdered members of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich, made a deep impression on the public.”¹⁴⁷ The third influence, a pattern stemming from the days of Kennedy’s presidency, was the force of the American Executive. After the rescue of hostages from a hijacked airplane in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1979 by German SOF and the famous Israeli commando rescue at Entebbe in 1976, President Jimmy Carter forced a counterterrorist capability on the Department of Defense.¹⁴⁸

Thus, Delta Force was established in 1977; *five years after* the incident at Munich in 1972. It was not mission-ready until 1979. Delta Force, however, had a very limited mission—counter-terrorism. As a result, its creation “Did not establish a joint special operations capability, nor did it signal wholehearted support for special operations forces in general.”¹⁴⁹

That it took five years to establish Delta after the terrorist threat manifest itself in Munich reflects the fact that the Pentagon was not enthusiastic about this elite force. “Remaining Special Forces groups had little money for training and were rarely called upon.”¹⁵⁰ Today, it is generally accepted that SOF must constantly innovate and spend large amounts of money on training, and training as a joint force among all services.¹⁵¹ While SOF had some advocates among the military’s leadership, it still lacked senior officers with a proper understanding of the capability. Sustained innovation requires junior officers who, over generations, become senior officers that advocate for change

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

and also acutely understand the thing they advocate.¹⁵² Thus, at the time, if Delta were to be used properly as an innovative capability, lots of money needed to be spent on peacetime training: the value of this paradoxically large investment into deterring what looked like a small threat would not be seen until after the tragedy in Iran.

The unwillingness to invest in this capability is indicative of the reasons that the hostage rescue would fail. On a tactical level, the U.S. did not properly grow SOF; flowing from that improper growth, the U.S. did not look at the SOF capability as a combined one: the Army, Navy, and Air Force built separate low-intensity capabilities, thus compromising the joint nature of the rescue effort.¹⁵³ The absence of a competent low-level military threat was symptomatic of strategic misjudgment. The United States failed to regard second-tier threats as serious.

The Reformatory Process

This section will begin by looking at the failed hostage rescue in Iran, the strategic pitfalls of the failed rescue, and most importantly, it will discuss how the United States reformed its strategy at large and changed the organization and tactics of SOF to meet with that change in strategy. It will then explain how those reforms were half-completed by Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada in 1983. After this partly-successful strategic special operation, the United States was ready to form Special Operations Command as part of its large-scale reforms of the military in its 1986 *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act*. Because of the failure in Iran, the mild failure in Grenada, the United States' new security strategy as the cold war was boiling

¹⁵² Stephen Peter Rosen, "New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer, 1988), p. 136.

¹⁵³ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, pp. 58-69. Marquis lengthily discusses the separate growth of Air Force, Navy, and Army SOF capabilities. The growth of the Air Force and Navy capabilities mirrors the improper creation of the Army's Delta Force.

down in the Reagan Administration, and finally the relentless work of innovative civilians, there will eventually be a framework in which it will be possible to analyze the strategic role of special operations in the modern context from the end of the 1980's through the terrorist strike of September 2001.

Desert One—Horrible Tragedy with Mild Consequences

“On November 4, 1979, a mob of Islamic fundamentalists overran the U.S. embassy in Tehran, seizing sixty-three diplomats and embassy personnel. Thus began the Iranian hostage crisis, a 444-day ordeal that was to be the Carter administration's most serious foreign policy crisis.”¹⁵⁴ Iran was in the middle of a revolution that brought Islamic fundamentalists to power; and the new rulers did not actively seek to end the hostage crisis. It became eminently clear that this responsibility would fall on the U.S. As of 6 November, the United States began discussing the possibility of a rescue mission in its joint Special Coordinating Committee (SCC). President Carter would only approve a rescue if diplomatic means of recovering hostages failed altogether. The U.S. public commiserated with Carter's sentiments. But as March 1980 came, the public began demanding that something be done to free the hostages; and the looming Presidential elections meant that Carter had to act.¹⁵⁵

The military began planning for the rescue in November 1979. Because the capability did not exist, an *ad hoc* Joint Task Force (JTF) was formed to begin training for the threat. Obsessed with maintaining a high level of operational security (OPSEC), the Commander of the JTF reported directly and exclusively to the Joint Chiefs of Staff; only the executive, the JTF, and the SCC had any knowledge of rescue operations. The

¹⁵⁴ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 114.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

JTF dubbed the mission “Desert One.”¹⁵⁶ Most of the conventional military and U.S. bureaucracy were kept completely separated from the preparations.

That brings out two crucial theoretical points. On the tactical level, the stage was set for a benchmark moment in the development of the SOF capability. It would be up to SOF exclusively to be the military arm of the nation’s most important foreign policy goal at a time when these forces were not prepared to carry out such a mission. Even if the U.S. wanted to rescue the hostages immediately, the capability did not exist. On a strategic level, between 3 and 4 November, terrorism went from being a low-level non-concern that the U.S. did not sufficiently plan for in the face of the Soviet threat, to the nation’s primary policy concern.

Thus, as the JTF began to form at the end of November, its Commander’s assessment was that “A force capability was beginning to emerge, but that major deficiencies in planning, intelligence, communications, and training were evident.”¹⁵⁷ Again, ill-preparedness on a strategic and tactical level seemed to doom Desert One from the beginning. Indicative of special operations mission training, many training exercises went into rehearsing for this singular mission. Between 30 November and 23 April, the JTF trained for countless hours, bringing together Marine Corps helicopter pilots, Air Force C-130 crews and Combat Control Teams (CCTs), and the Army’s Delta Force.¹⁵⁸ That training was wasted.

On the day of the mission, 24 April 1980, the following tasks were assigned. The Army’s Delta Force and Air Force CCTs would drive in humvees to the embassy, with

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 122-123.

¹⁵⁷ Special Operations Review Group, *Rescue Mission Report* (Washington, D.C.: The Pentagon, 1980), p.5. This was a report made to the JCS in August 1980. This is the unclassified version of that report.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-8.

Delta carrying out the actual prisoner snatch; Air Force C-130 crews would take these commandos on low-level flights from a training area in Oman to a remote Desert staging area; Marine pilots flew underneath radar detection in RH-53 helicopters from the Navy's aircraft carrier *Nimitz*; accompanied by more Air Force C-130 crews used to refuel the helicopters.¹⁵⁹

What would follow can only be characterized as an extremely complex failure. After the failure, the JCS appointed a Special Operations Review Group to make a report of the events at Desert One. The problems of the attempted rescue were so manifold that this group would find 23 problem areas worth analysis.¹⁶⁰ The following is the Special Operations Review Group's summary of the mission itself in a section entitled "Execution and Abort," and could serve as military proof of Murphy's Law.

On the evening of 24 April, after 5-1/2 months of planning and training under very tight OPSEC, eight RH-53 helicopters took off from the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* and began a journey of nearly 600 nautical miles at night and low altitude to a preselected refueling site, Desert One, in the desert. The C-130 element with the ground rescue forces was also in the execution phase on a different track and time schedule to Desert One. Approximately two hours after takeoff, the crew of Helicopter #6 received cockpit indications of an impending rotor blade failure; landed; verified the malfunction (an automatic abort situation); and abandoned their aircraft. The crew was picked by another helicopter, which then continued the mission individually.

Approximately one hour thereafter, the helicopter formation unexpectedly encountered a dust cloud of unknown size and density.

The helicopters broke out of the first area of suspended dust but, within an hour, entered a second, larger and denser area. While attempting to navigate through this second area with severely degraded visibility, a second helicopter (#5) experienced a failure of several critical navigation and flight instruments. Due to progressively deteriorating flight conditions that made safe flight extremely questionable, the helicopter pilot determined that it would be unwise to continue. He aborted the mission, reversed course, and recovered on *Nimitz*. Eventually six of the original eight helicopters arrived at the refueling site in interval between approximately 50 and 85 minutes later than planned.

While en route, a third helicopter (#2) experienced a partial hydraulic failure, but the crew elected to continue to the refueling site believing repairs could be accomplished there. Upon landing, however, the crew and the helicopter unit commander determined that the helicopter could not be repaired. A hydraulic had failed due to a fluid leak, and no replacement pump was available. Even if a pump had been immediately available, there was insufficient time to change it, repair the

¹⁵⁹ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁶⁰ Special Operations Review Group, *Rescue Mission Report*, p. 12.

cause of the leak, service the system, and complete the next leg prior to daylight. The helicopter was unsafe to continue the mission unrepaired.

Earlier, it had been determined that a minimum of six operational helicopters would be required at the refueling site to continue the mission. Since at this point there were only five operational, the on scene commander advised COMJTF (Commander, Joint Task Force) by radio of the situation, and he in turn communicated to Washington the status of the force and his intention to abort the operation and return to launch base. The President concurred in the decision that the mission could not continue, and preparations began for withdrawal of the five operational helicopters, the C-130s, and the rescue force.

While repositioning one helicopter to permit another to top off his fuel tanks for the return flight, the first helicopter collided with one of the refueling C-130s. Both aircraft were immediately engulfed in flames in which eight crew members died and five other members of the team were injured. Since the C-130 was loaded with members of the rescue force awaiting extraction, even greater injury and loss of life were avoided only by swift and disciplined evacuation of the burning aircraft. Shortly afterwards, ammunition aboard both aircraft began to explode. Several helicopters were struck by shrapnel from the explosion and/or the burning ammunition, and at least one and possibly more were rendered nonflyable. At this point, with time and fuel running out for the C-130s, the decision was made to transfer all helicopter crews to the remaining C-130s and to depart the area.¹⁶¹

Certainly, high-risk missions like these have a large chance of failure. The security situation, however, demanded that the U.S. be able to carry out high-risk missions with small, elite forces to meet large policy objectives. The events at Desert One would be laughable if not for the eight Americans pointlessly lost. But the importance of the mission to U.S. policy, coupled with the public nature of the failure¹⁶², forced change. Thus, rather than abandon the capability as it had in the past, the tragic events in Iran led the U.S. to overhaul its strategy as well and reform the forces necessary to support that strategy. Next we turn to the political and strategic fallout caused by the failed rescue that led to reform. Then, there is a discussion about what the reforms were and how they were made to meet that new strategy. Those changes, made from 1980-1983, will prove to be incomplete.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶² In bold capitals, the headline of the New York Times, on 25 April 1980, read: **“U.S. ATTEMPT TO RESCUE IRAN HOSTAGES FAILS; 8 DIE AS PLANES COLLIDE DURING WITHDRAWAL; ACCIDENT ON GROUND No Clashes Occur During Mission in Desert Area, White House Says Many Questions Unanswered...Move Called a Surprise in ‘Every Possible Instance.’”** In other words, the mission was done quietly, but its failure was exhibited loudly.

The botched rescue had important strategic consequences. There was political fallout from the failure itself; and there was an exposure of the gaps in U.S. security strategy that were already present. In the aggregate, the incident bore or shed light on four consequences. The first two consequences deal with general strategy. There were international and domestic political ramifications of actually failing a rescue; and the failed rescue showed that third world nations and non-state actors, acting alone, had the ability to pose large security threats to the United States, specifically via terrorism.

The last two consequences regard the botched rescue as indicative of a failure of the U.S. to pay attention to low-level threats. The security atmosphere precipitated by not treating low-level threats with seriousness was one permissive to Soviet relative gains. The USSR was able to use Third World anti-American powers to its favor; and while the U.S. spent so much time balancing with the USSR on a conventional level, the failed rescue helped to reveal that Soviets had a very capable unconventional force to support their Third World agenda that the US, for a long time, overlooked.

(1) The Iran hostage rescue failed for several reasons; in any failed rescue, “Whatever the reasons, the ‘rescuing’ country may suffer a grave political and psychological blow.”¹⁶³ In terms of Desert One, there were consequences on a domestic and international level. Domestically, Carter lost the 1980 election to President Ronald Reagan by 440 electoral votes¹⁶⁴ because he failed embarrassingly to meet his most important foreign policy objective. Internationally, and foreshadowing the next three consequences of failure, the lack of an adequate response by the U.S. showed terrorists and Third World powers that one of the world’s most powerful nations was susceptible to

¹⁶³ Shlomo Gazit, “Risk, Glory, and the Rescue Operation,” *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer, 1981), p. 129.

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.presidentelect.org>

low-level attacks. “The entire world wondered if the United States [military] had indeed become a ‘paper tiger.’”¹⁶⁵

(2) The first pre-existent threat manifest by Desert One was that Third World and non-state players offered a significant security concern that had long been overlooked. Just after his inauguration in 1980, President Reagan stated that “Terrorism has become a widespread and regrettable fact of [the] international system.”¹⁶⁶ The U.S. was not well-suited to meet these threats. The U.S. military was concerned with its nuclear stalemate with the Soviets; as the cold war wore on for over 40 years, “U.S. power steadily declined relative not only to the Soviet Union...but also the Third World. Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, Nicaragua, Ethiopia...these countries symbolized growing U.S. difficulty in maintaining control of these third-world countries.”¹⁶⁷ The U.S. may have been in a situation of mutually assured destruction that stopped all-out nuclear war with the Soviets; but in terms of classic balance of power concerns, it was losing relative power vis-à-vis secondary and tertiary threats. Desert One was a clear expression of this declining global influence. In this case, SOF helped the United States to realize a decline in worldwide political consideration.

(3) In not controlling Iran specifically, the United States allowed the Soviet Union to gain relative power in the Middle East. The hostage situation was a tangible result of the political situation in Iran. That political situation greatly favored Moscow. From a security standpoint, the United States had intelligence-gathering sites on Iran’s Soviet

¹⁶⁵ Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr., *Unification of the United States Armed Forces: Implementing the 1986 Defense Reorganization Act* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1996), p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ Gazit, “Risk, Glory, and the Rescue Operation,” p. 111.

¹⁶⁷ Jochen Hippeler, “Low-Intensity Warfare: Key Strategy for the Third World Theater,” *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 144 (January-February 1987), p. 33.

border. After Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution was so successful, these sites were closed. Additionally, Iran had been a U.S. ally in policing the Middle East. "Iran immediately...withdrew from the role of policeman for the Persian Gulf, thus depriving the United States of a reliable ally who could safeguard Western interests in the region."¹⁶⁸ From a geo-political standpoint, "Khomeini embraced the Anti-American grouping in the Arab world." Khomeini cut off relations with Israel and Egypt, the remaining important U.S. allies in the Middle East, in 1979.¹⁶⁹ Due to the public failure of the rescue attempt, Russia was able to use this blow to the Americans as an attack on the credibility of the U.S. as an ally, and use the situation to its relative diplomatic gain. "It signified abroad that for the defense of even its closest clients, the United States was no longer able, or willing, to ignore the cost."¹⁷⁰ Within Iran, after Desert One, communist pro-Moscow factions were allowed to operate in the open and thus contribute to the political situation in Iran. "Khomeini's regime virtually eliminated all the persistent sources of tension between Moscow and [Iran]."¹⁷¹ None of this is to say that the failed rescue itself caused these strategic losses. Desert One, rather, manifest gaps in U.S. security strategy that the USSR was already taking advantage of.

(4) The Soviets were able to paint a picture to Third World powers of the U.S. as an ally unwilling to defend its closest partners. The American inability to help its poor allies came into direct contrast with a vast Soviet capability to do so. The U.S. failed geopolitically by allowing its most dangerous threat to protect its own allies. The Soviets were able to offer this protection due in large part to a far superior SOF capability. The

¹⁶⁸ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "The Soviet Union and Iran under Khomeini," *International Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn, 1981), p. 599.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 600.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 600-601.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

U.S. failed to balance with the Russians on any tactical level that did not deal with conventional and nuclear forces. Indeed, the Soviet Union, as a closed society, was able to carry out any covert operations it wished; it did not have a democracy that unsavory military actions could compromise. But the United States, its open society aside, completely failed to acknowledge the importance of the SOF capability. SOF, especially when used clandestinely or covertly, help level the international playing field with closed societies that do not have constraints on their foreign policy options. Rather than attempting to level the field, the United States permissively left the Third World open to lean heavily in the favor of the Soviets. In 1987, a study was commissioned by the Special Operations Panel of the Readiness Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee entitled *United States and Soviet Special Operations*. The first chapter of that study is entitled “Comparative Priorities: Soviet Consistency/U.S. Inconsistency.” The crux of that chapter, and the study as a whole, is that “U.S. priorities [overlooked] a large part of the conflict spectrum, and in any case are inconsistent.”¹⁷² In terms of SOF being the force behind operations on the low end of the conflict spectrum, it speaks to the fact that Soviets placed a large emphasis upon peacetime special operations, while the U.S. never did; the U.S. recognized it was falling behind in the Third World, but, in the face of the Soviet threat, did not foster the forces necessary to winning Third World proxy conflicts with the U.S.S.R. The U.S., partially because of a public disinterest in Third World intervention after the traumatic experience in Vietnam, unequivocally failed to prepare for anything beyond all-out nuclear war.¹⁷³

¹⁷² John M. Collins, *United States and Soviet Special Operations: A Study by the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), p. 4.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* pp. 3-5.

Desert One showed that the United States was completely unprepared to cope with an emerging threat from developing nations. How would it reform to meet with these threats? The Nixon and Carter administrations had looked to primarily diplomatic means for controlling these low-level threats, and it did not work; the debacle in Iran showed that these means were not enough to stave off significant geopolitical fallout from smaller international players. “These approaches failed badly as the Iranian...revolution and the hostage affair in Tehran demonstrated.”¹⁷⁴ Hand-in-hand with that failure was an allowance by the Nixon and Carter administrations for special operations to “Fall from favor after the Vietnam War.”¹⁷⁵

The passing over of this tactical necessity was disastrous. As shown above, the mistake was felt far beyond the tactical; Desert One was indicative of a decline in relative U.S. power on the strategic level. In recognizing the implications of that decline, President Reagan knew he had to change something quickly and carry out that change well. By the mid-1980s, “The Reagan Administration [promoted] a strategy of indirect military intervention in the Third World, low-intensity warfare, which [was intended] not only to halt the decline of U.S. influence, but also to regain control over countries like Iran.”¹⁷⁶ An un-abrasive, non-conventional force was necessary to fight the type of war that Reagan sought. What follows are the steps taken to establish a dominant and effective standing special operations capability to meet with the strategic necessity of low-intensity conflicts. In terms of SOF, then, the final steps of their innovation and acceptance into the American military machine are intrinsically linked with U.S. security strategy. Those steps would not be completed until 1987.

¹⁷⁴ Hippler, “Low Intensity Warfare,” p. 33.

¹⁷⁵ Collins, *United States and Soviet Special Operations*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁶ Hippler, “Low Intensity Warfare,” p. 33.

The first step came in direct response to Desert One's failure. Within four months, the Special Operations Review Group wrote its *Rescue Mission Report* for the JCS. The report analyzed 23 areas of concern from the mission, 11 of which were considered to be "Major Issues." Of those 11 issues, four can be said to only have a scope limited to rescue missions in a place like Iran: Size of the helicopter force; Alternatives to the Desert One site; Handling the dust phenomenon; and C-130 Pathfinders. Seven of those major concerns, more importantly, had to do with the state of the SOF capability at large in 1980: OPSEC; Independent review of plans; Organization, command and control, and the applicability of existing JCS plans; Comprehensive readiness evaluation; Overall coordination of joint training; Command and control at desert one; and Centralized and integrated intelligence support external to the JTF.¹⁷⁷ Among these seven issues, an overriding theme appears that the joint SOF capability lacked any coherent and understood organization.

The most important part of that report were the conclusions. In addition to several counterfactual ideas about what could have made the Desert One operation a success, the report drew two general conclusions and made two recommendations for SOF reform, and ultimately for reform of the military in general. One of the conclusions was that, if a JTF had already existed, it could have better understood the level of OPSEC was necessary—because the organization did not already exist, the COMJTF was under the impression that too much OPSEC was necessary to the detriment of gathering proper information to carry out the attack.¹⁷⁸ The first general conclusion was more important, however; for it would give birth to reform. That conclusion stated:

¹⁷⁷ Special Operations Review Group, *Rescue Mission Report*, p. 56.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

The *ad hoc* nature of the organization and planning is related to most of the major issues and underlies the group's conclusions.

By not utilizing an existing JTF organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to start, literally, from the beginning to establish a JTF, find a commander, create an organization, provide a staff, develop a plan, select the units, and train the forces before attaining even the most rudimentary mission readiness.

An existing JTF organization, even with a small staff and only cadre units assigned, would have provided an organizational framework of professional expertise around which a larger tailored force organization could quickly coalesce.

The important point is that the infrastructure would have existed—the trusted agents, the built-in OPSEC, the secure communications. At a minimum, COMJTF would have had a running start and could have devoted more hours to plans, operations, and tactics rather than to administration and logistics.¹⁷⁹

It was apparent, then, that strategic special operations required a standing, joint force not fashioned after the conventional model of separate forces carrying out separate duties.

The two recommendations it made were for the establishment an organization to make that capability possible. Its first recommendation was that a “Counterterrorist Joint Task Force (CTJTF) be established as a field agency of the JCS with permanently assigned staff personnel and certain assigned forces.” It recommended that the CTJTF should have officers of all four branches of the military that reported directly to the JCS and that its forces should be permanently assigned to the JTF, and that they should be “Selected on the basis of their capabilities in the field of special operations of various types.”¹⁸⁰ The first recommendation, then, was for the final organizational permanence of SOF in the U.S. military.

The second recommendation dealt with who should make this capability come into being. At no point have SOF personnel, those who understand special operations doctrine, had an integral say in SOF innovation; it would be necessary, as models of military innovation show, for those with proper understanding of the capability over a

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

generation to indoctrinate the innovation.¹⁸¹ In this light, the report urged “The JCS [to] give careful consideration to the establishment of a Special Operations Advisory Panel, comprised of a group of carefully selected high-ranking officers who have career backgrounds in special operations”¹⁸² to help form this capability.

The right ideas were present from the Special Operations Review Group; predictably, it would take years before their recommendations were heeded. The same General Meyer that helped and hindered the formation of Delta Force, in May 1980, tried to listen to the recommendations of the Review Group. He proposed a Strategic Services Command (STRATSERCOM) in the Army as a “New combatant command that would reach beyond the Army and bring the counterterrorist forces of each of the military services together in a joint permanent task force.”¹⁸³ Predictably, the JCS would not go for this, citing normal fears of diminishing conventional capabilities. In the Army, as in the rest of the services, the most that was initially done was a coalescing of the SOF within each respective service: there were ready and standing forces, they were simply not joint.¹⁸⁴

While the military resisted reform, the American civilian bureaucracy was more helpful in enacting it. Noel Koch was a special operator in Vietnam who landed a job as deputy assistant secretary in the Defense Department. He pushed hard and formed, from the Special Operations Review Group’s suggestions, a Special Operations Policy Advisory Group (SOPAG). He chose all well-respected and retired officers who were of

¹⁸¹ Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” p. 136.

¹⁸² Special Operations Review Group, *Rescue Mission Report*, p. 61.

¹⁸³ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, p. 73.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-79. The Army formed, within itself the 1st Special Operations Command; the Air Force formed the 1st Special Operations Wing; the Navy grew its capability with the inculcation of a new and elite unit, much like the Army’s Delta Force, with SEAL Team 6.

General rank and had special operations experience to be on the panel. The panel reported directly to the Secretary of Defense.¹⁸⁵

Simultaneous with his push to establish SOPAG, Koch also fought for a policy directive forcing the JCS to form a joint SOF element. On 3 March 1983, Koch convinced Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Thayer to sign off on the directive; to appease the JCS, Secretary of Defense Weinberger would not do so, keeping the policy directive from ultimately having its desired effect. The memorandum officially carried four points. Those were:

1. Necessary force structure expansion and enhancements in command and control, personnel policy, training, and equipment will be implemented no longer than the end of Fiscal Year 1990.
2. Collateral activities will be enhanced as necessary to provide fully effective support to the planning and execution of special operations.
3. Each service will assign SOF and related activities sufficient resource allocation priority and will establish appropriate intensive management mechanisms to ensure that these objectives are met.
4. Resource decisions for current and programmed SOF, once made at the Secretary of Defense level, will not be changed or reduced by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) or Service staffs unless coordinated by the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Neil Koch in this case) and the Assistant Secretary of Defense and approved by the Secretary of Defense.

It closed by saying that it was necessary for each service to submit a master plan for implementation of these changes by 1 March 1984 to Koch.¹⁸⁶

In the memo, there was no direction to implement these changes, so it was hard to achieve the joint command that Koch sought. But two positive effects were felt. First, because Koch was made an integral part in these changes as per the memo, there was an advocate for SOF involved in the changes. Second, there was an immediate formation of the Joint Special Operations agency (JSOA) underneath the JCS. This group would not have great power in innovating SOF; rather, it was a group that re-established the joint

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

SOF capability of the Vietnam War; in other words, the JCS would not take any focus away from conventional war-fighting, at least not to a degree that had never been felt before. In the end, JSOA was a weak organization, given the power only to lobby for SOF, but not direct SOF action before submitting plans to higher military authorities¹⁸⁷, again reminiscent of MACVSOG in the Vietnam Conflict.

Koch simultaneously lobbied for SOF in Congress. Congress dealt with military acquisitions, and the effects of his lobbying did not cover broad acquisitions concerns, but only those stemming directly from Desert One. With the help of some allies in Congress, Koch was able to help draft Initiative 17, lobbying for a greater helicopter allocation to SOF. Opponents of special operations, however, essentially put the Initiative down by allocating helicopter activities of SOF to the army, thus diminishing a joint capability even more. Initiative 17 was largely unsuccessful.¹⁸⁸

Still, all the lobbying of Koch and his allies in the civilian bureaucracy, together with help from military organizations such as the Special Operations Review Group, did have some effect. By the mid-1980s, their relentless work activated the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), commanded by one Brigadier General. Though technically a unified command, it was largely ineffective. The scope of this command only encompassed the most elite units of every service's SOF (Navy SEAL Team 6, Delta, Army SOF Aviation Unit Task Force 160, and 2 Battalions of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment). JSOC, however, did not complete the core of SOF reform: the creation of a "Unified command of SOF and protection of SOF fiscal and manpower

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-89.

resources.”¹⁸⁹ The conventional military was scared of handing over control of such a potentially expensive resource to a command separate from its own sphere. The capability had not yet tested its mettle, and thus conventional leaders felt it was too risky in terms of the possible harm done to large-scale capabilities, specifically in the budget. If the JCS still controlled the SOF budget, and SOF did not yet have widespread Congressional support, the conventional military could keep the SOF budget at 1/10% of the entire defense budget.¹⁹⁰ In providing slight increases in budget, manpower, and a nominal joint capability, the JCS were able to appease Congress and Reagan’s policy-makers that sought an expanded low-intensity capability.

From 1980-1983, there was a struggle to reform SOF. There was still a lot of pressure to keep SOF marginalized in the military by not granting them their own autocratic and unified command. As usual, it was largely up to civilians to maintain a standing special operations capability. By 1983, the reforms were still half measures—it would take something else to force them to completion. The reform returned SOF to what they had been in Vietnam. Consequently, the success that SOF have in their next important mission, Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada, is only partial, with many areas of failure.

The partial failure of SOF in Grenada (and historically, in every other SOF campaign), coupled with Reagan’s Third World strategy of the mid-1980s and the looming security vacuum presented by the cold war’s end, would complete the innovation. Conventional minds, throughout history, followed a pattern of building up SOF for war then diminishing the capability post-conflict. SOF will work best when they

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

are finally given authority to advocate and plan for themselves outside of the conventional command structure; the recognition of the necessity for this type of organization was finally forced by the security situation at the end of the Reagan Administration and the tactical lessons learned from Grenada; the whole process, in retrospect, will have been started by the failure of Desert One.

Operation Urgent Fury: Proving the Tactical and Strategic Necessity of Joint Forces

Operations in Grenada in 1983 were the first sign of Reagan's new policy toward the Third World. This conflict proved the tactical necessity of a joint SOF outside of the typical military organizational structure to support Reagan's policy. In Vietnam, SOF did not have singular organizational authority, and their missions were not completely successful. The same will be said in Grenada; only, after Grenada, the SOF capability was grown, not deactivated.

Grenada is the southernmost Caribbean Island. On that island were approximately 1,000 U.S. citizens, many of whom were medical students. Grenada had a supposedly democratic government. The United States, however, in again overlooking a Third World Soviet expansion—this time in its own hemisphere—failed to realize that the supposedly democratic party coming into power was actually communist. That government, the New JEWEL (Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education, and Liberation) Movement (NJM), led by Maurice Bishop, “In their dealings with Soviets and Cubans...sought to prove that they were good Communists, useful as a launching pad for spreading subversion to neighboring countries, and useful as allies.”¹⁹¹ Bishop

¹⁹¹ United States Department of State, *Lessons of Grenada* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 1.

wrongfully imprisoned all figures of internal opposition.¹⁹² The nation, and its deceptive leadership, became very unstable.

On 23 October 1983, terrorist bombings in Beirut, Lebanon killed 241 U.S. Marines. This contributed to the perception of the U.S. military as largely ineffective. President Reagan felt it was necessary to “Improve the credibility of U.S. military capabilities.”¹⁹³ Given the high U.S. civilian presence, the political unrest, a Cuban military detachment on the island of Grenada, the bombing in Beirut, and Reagan’s desire to forcefully control the Third World, Operation Urgent Fury (which launched officially on 25 October 1983) was labeled as a “Just cause that could restore confidence of the American people in their military.”¹⁹⁴

Geopolitically, the invasion reached its goals. “Grenada represents to many the first instance in which a subdued by a Communist-dominated, Soviet-supported government has been liberated from without.”¹⁹⁵ In terms of body count, the operation was also a success. The U.S. suffered 19 killed and 134 total casualties; the Grenadian and Cuban Forces suffered 92 killed and 509 total casualties.¹⁹⁶ But Operation Urgent Fury did not come close to complete tactical success. On the conventional level, the largest failure was that “There were interoperability problems between the services, particularly in the area of communications.”¹⁹⁷ Nearly all the problems stemmed from an inability to be joint in nature.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁹³ Lovelace, *Unification of the United States Armed Forces*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁵ Nicholas Dujmović, *The Grenada Documents: Window on Totalitarianism* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1988), p. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Vijay Tiwathia, *The Grenada War: Anatomy of a Low-Intensity Conflict* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1987), p. 113.

¹⁹⁷ Lovelace, *Unification of the United States Armed Forces*, p. 6.

As a result, SOF were also quite ineffective. SOF were involved in seven of the eight listed objectives for the invasion of Grenada. Only two of the planned SOF missions were successfully implemented.¹⁹⁸ Most of the problems with SOF in Grenada pointed back to their improper implementation and organization by leaders. First, “The 1983 invasion of Grenada caught the CIA without a single agent on the island.” As a result of this, the U.S. improperly estimated the number of Cuban forces it would fight; more importantly, though the U.S. claimed to be intervening to save the 1,000 American civilians on the island, it “Did not know where many of them were...and took three days to locate some 400 students living on the western half of the island.”¹⁹⁹ Though saving these medical students may have been a trumped up *causus belli* aimed at appeasing the American public, the operational mishaps still exposed gaps in U.S. capabilities. The lack of intelligence and coordination of intelligence could have been solved by having a standing and prepared joint SOF organization. A standing organization “Is able to develop close, permanent ties to other organizations, notably the intelligence agencies, whose support is vital in special operations.”²⁰⁰

Once the main invasion started, SOF mostly failed much in the same confused manner as Desert One. Like in Iran, the biggest problem was that most of the SOF never even got to their targets. Also, there was no integration of SOF—though JSOC was formed, each individual group of SEALs, Rangers, Delta, or Air Force SOF group fought for its own specific missions, and most of these failed. In the end, SOF could hardly be utilized beyond the tactical level in this operation because their organization made their possible effects negligible.

¹⁹⁸ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, p. 91.

¹⁹⁹ Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options*, p. 170.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

To show a few examples of failure, Delta Force was clandestinely dropped in on the night of 24 October to report the suitability of a drop zone for a large paratrooper invasion on 25 October and clear a runway for air operations. They were, however, discovered by construction workers before their mission ever started; these construction workers alerted Cuban forces, and “According to some accounts 22 Delta members were either killed or wounded in this engagement by the time they were rescued by Rangers.”²⁰¹

Three SEAL teams also dropped in the night before the invasion. They were supposed to prepare the beachheads for an amphibious landing by Marines in the morning. They were supposed to drop into the ocean from the air, inflate boats, and secure their respective beachheads. Of the three teams dropped, only one even reached their beachhead; one of the teams had a member die due to improperly parachuting into the ocean, while the second failed team drifted off to sea in turbulent waters because its boat’s engine failed.²⁰²

The only thing that could be characterized as a mild strategic-level success for SOF was in securing Governor General Sir Paul Scoon, an important political figure that would later help to stabilize Grenada. Tactically, however, this mission was even a failure. The plan originally called for a Black Hawk Helicopter to come and retrieve the Governor with his SEAL rescuers. The Black Hawk, predictably, was nowhere to be found due to improper landing conditions. The SEALs waited with the Governor for a

²⁰¹ Tiwathia, *The Grenada War*, p. 81.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

day until a group of Marines with Armored Personnel Carriers came to take the group away.²⁰³

Grenada, again, was a geopolitical success. Outside the Pentagon, however, the fight was seen as a tactical embarrassment on many levels. Where the military saw victory, the civilian community saw failures of SOF and conventional forces. “Even with the establishment of JSOC, there was little or no integration of the units of SOF...communication failures throughout American force only amplified the command and control chaos that resulted from a lack of joint planning and training including special operations and conventional forces.”²⁰⁴

Goldwater-Nichols in Light of SOF: Finally a Unified Command

The military was stuck in the cold war whereas security strategists and the American civilian bureaucracy—after the terrorist events in Beirut and Iran; and after the invasion of Grenada—saw that American security strategy and the military that backed that strategy were outdated. The military services fought to restrict joint commands and, concordantly, an autonomous SOF command. Because the Pentagon refused to do it alone, Congress would take it upon itself to force the entire military to reform in the mid to late 1980s.

This civilian-inspired innovation was based on the strategy of low-intensity warfare professed by Reagan. The whole military, therefore, would be forced to become joint in nature to fight a different type of war. This type of war was Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC), which “Demands that war be morally waged with minimum violence.”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁰⁴ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, 116.

²⁰⁵ Tiwathia, *The Grenada War*, Preface.

Part of the reform was based on a necessity to have a quiet and elite force capable of minimal escalation—in other words, a capable and standing SOF force. The strategic necessity of a capable SOF, coupled with the newfound organizational requirement for a military ready to act jointly, and a Congress willing to destroy harmfully conventional military notions, would lead to a unified SOF capability that was finally outside of the conventional command structure—Congress will win the battle that SOF never had the power to win by itself.

Legislative Dominance: Civilians Champion the SOF Cause

There were four civilian documents integral to implementing change. All spoke very specifically to joint capabilities. The first document was called the *Locher Report* or *Defense Organization: The Need for Change*. This report was begun in June 1983 and reported in October 1985. The second document was President Reagan's response to the first report. The president made a "Blue Ribbon Commission" to look into the findings of the *Locher Report*; this commission produced their *Interim Report on Defense Management* in February 1986. The third document is a piece of legislation. On 1 October 1986, the *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act* was made law. The *Cohen-Nunn Amendment* to this legislation dealt specifically with SOF. Each of these documents sought to change the military as a whole in terms of re-organization of joint commands and increased civilian control²⁰⁶; for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be limited to how each far-reaching document spoke to the limited gain of special operations as part of larger reforms. There will be additional discussion of other civilian actions taken to further the SOF capability.

²⁰⁶ Lovelace, *Unification of the United States Armed Forces*, pp. 7-11.

The Locher Report made many radical suggestions to the point of wishing to disestablish the JCS altogether. For the purposes of SOF, the most important suggestion made was “To remove the Service component commanders within the unified combatant commands from the operational chain of command.”²⁰⁷ In terms of special operations, this would mean that JSOC would report directly to the OSD and would be completely autonomous. As research was being done for this report, Neil Koch was back working civilian channels of influence. Seeing that Congress was going to be the one to force reform, not the military, he gained Congressional allies. In the mid-1980s, Koch had two important people working in Congress to do what he hoped to achieve in the OSD. Representative Dan Daniel was a ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee who by 1985 had formed the Special Operations Panel on the Readiness Subcommittee; Senator Bill Nichols (The one that would ultimately be a namesake of the bill to change the military) also was public about the need to revolutionize SOF.²⁰⁸ Koch ensured that SOF would be a large part of military innovation in the 1980s.

The second paper, which came from a commission established specifically by President Reagan, had three recommendations that deal more specifically with how to implement innovation in unified commands and to what extent these commands can compromise conventional military organizations.

Subject to review and approval of the Secretary of Defense, Unified Commanders should be given broader authority to structure subordinate commands, joint task forces, and support activities in a way that best supports their missions and results in a significant reduction in the size and numbers of military headquarters.

The Unified Command Plan should be revised to assure increased flexibility to deal with situations that overlap the geographic boundaries of the current combatant commands and with changing world conditions.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰⁸ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, pp. 109-111.

For contingencies short of general war, the Secretary of Defense, with the advice of the Chairman and the JCS, would have the flexibility to establish the shortest possible chains of command for each force deployed, consistent with proper supervision and support. This would help the Commanders in Chief (CINCs) and the JCS perform better in situations ranging from peace to crisis to general war.²⁰⁹

The paper described a flexible command that could operate without borders and undertake missions short of war. Reading between the lines, the commission called for an autonomous SOF capability based in a new security strategy, but used language that was not so radical so as to make the report's findings unactionable.

Finally, on 1 October 1986, the military was forced to reform via Congressional legislation. The *Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act* was not afraid to change conventional military mores. The law stated:

(a) UNIFIED AND SPECIFIC COMBATANT COMMANDS.—With the advice and assistance of the Chairman of the JCS (CJCS), the President, through the Secretary of Defense (SecDef), shall—

- (1) establish unified combatant commands and specified combatant commands to perform military missions; and
- (2) prescribe the force structure of those commands....[the responsibility of those shall be constantly updated no less than every two years]...

(c) DEFINITIONS—In this chapter:

- (1) The term “unified combatant command” means a military command which has broad, continuing missions and which is composed of forces from two or more military departments.
- (2) The term “specified combatant command” means a military command which has broad, continuing missions and which is normally composed of forces from a single military department....

(b) CHAIN OF COMMAND.—Unless otherwise directed by the President, the chain of command to a unified or specified combatant command runs—

- (1) from the President to the SecDef; and
- (2) from the SecDef to the commander of the combatant command.²¹⁰

When SOF did get its own combatant command, then, it would have organizational autonomy outside of the conventional military; that command's existence and the necessity of its acquisitions and operations would be ensured by reporting directly to

²⁰⁹ The Presidential Blue Ribbon Commission, *Interim Report to the President on Defense Management* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the President of the United States, 1986), p. 11.

²¹⁰ *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act*, Part B, Section 211, Chapter 6, § 161, 162 (October, 1986), pp. 22-23.

civilian leaders that championed their cause; the slow-to-innovate military would be left out of the SOF chain of command, and unlike in Vietnam, the hesitant-to-approve State Department would ultimately have little say in special operations. As the Act goes on to explain, “The Combatant Commander organizes commands and forces within that command as he considers necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command.”²¹¹

Two final parts of the act ensured permanence for special operations and ensured that conventional military minds concerned with their forces getting their classically huge portions of the defense budget would be sufficiently enraged.

(a) COMBATANT COMMAND BUDGETS.—The SecDef shall include in the annual budget of the Department of Defense submitted to Congress as a separate budget proposal for such activities of each of the unified and specified combatant commands as may be determined.²¹²

The SecDef now had complete control over the SOF budget—the special operations capability was no longer restricted through JCS fiscal manipulation. From 1982 to 1987, the SOF budget would increase from \$441 million to \$1.7 billion.²¹³ To ensure that this meant special operations, the innovation was made final as the act stated:

SEC. 212. INITIAL REVIEW OF COMBATANT COMMANDS

(a) MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED.—The first review of the missions, responsibilities, and force structure of the unified and specified combatant commands...shall include consideration of the following:

- (1) Creation of a unified combatant command for special operations missions which would combine the special operations missions, responsibilities, and forces of the armed forces.²¹⁴

Obviously, the military services did all they could to stop this change. But as the law came into effect, SOF gained more Congressional allies that would ensure their existence. Senators William Cohen and Sam Nunn provided the *Nunn-Cohen*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, Part B, Section 211, Chapter 6, § 164, p. 24.

²¹² *Ibid.*, Part B, Section 211, Chapter 6, § 166, p. 27.

²¹³ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, p. 131.

²¹⁴ *Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act*, Part B, Section 212, Chapter 6, (October, 1986), p. 28.

Amendment to the 1986 Defense Reorganization Act that passed on 14 November 1986.

The effects of this amendment were three-fold. First, it established United States Special Operation Command (USSOCOM) led by its own Commander in Chief (USCINCSOC); and the civilian attaché to that command by legislating into the Department of Defense the position of Assistant Secretary of Defense, Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. All exist to present-day as the leaders of the SOF capability. Second, it outlined in law the elements of special operations as “Direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs, psychological operations, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue, [and] such other activities as may be specified by the President or SecDef.” Third, as the SecDef was responsible for reporting budgets for each of the unified combatant commands, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict was made responsible for advocating and justifying the budget for special operations; the SecDef could only review an approved budget under the direction of the USCINCSOC.²¹⁵ SOF now had civilian partners that forced their organizational permanency in a military that did not want the capability. The rest of the story of special operations in U.S. strategy will be understood in that framework.

Conclusion: Forced Innovation in the Face of Emerging Threats

The United States transformed to be able to employ low-intensity warfare in the Third World. The failure of Desert One and the partial failure of Urgent Fury begot a joint, peacetime-ready force capable of fighting effective low-intensity conflicts as these missions led to the indoctrination of SOF inside the military but outside of its conventional command structure via SOCOM; and ensured large-scale reform in the U.S.

²¹⁵ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, pp. 145-146.

military. The Army outlined five components necessary to Reagan's reform to a low-intensity capability: Counterinsurgency; Organization of and support for insurgencies (or unconventional warfare); Spearhead operations (or direct action); Terrorist and counter-terrorist actions like rescue operations; and Peacekeeping operations.²¹⁶ A low-intensity strategy, based on these components, clearly cried out for effective SOF.

As the U.S. was developing this capability, the Soviet Union was at the beginning of its end. By the time the U.S. had adequate SOF, the Berlin Wall had nearly fallen. As the Soviets fell from power, the United States arose as the world's hegemon; along with this rise to unipolarity, America faced proliferating security concerns as the geopolitical world was thrown off kilter. The United States went from a nation essentially concerned with one adversary and one type of security threat to a nation with different enemies and likewise varied security threats.

In this new security situation, an adaptable and elite force was needed to face what was a multiplying number and type of threats to the United States. Because of Desert One, SOF (as part of the military at large) were forced to change to be able to fight many different types of battles. This change was forcibly mandated by civilians when military officers refused to innovate. The U.S. military may have been right in paying so much attention to the nuclear Soviet behemoth; but now that behemoth was gone and all that remained were rising low-level threats. The new security situation would prove the necessity of the special operations capability. SOF were reformed out of a need to control the Third World via low-intensity conflict in a cold war balancing game with the U.S.S.R.; but their worth would be proven in the modern, post-cold war context by contributing a credible responsive threat to U.S. security strategy in the Third World

²¹⁶ Hippler, "Low Intensity Warfare," p. 34.

and beyond. The Pentagon tried with all of its might to counter *Goldwater-Nichols* and *Cohen-Nunn* legislation to no avail; the emerging security situation of the late 1980s and the 1990s, coupled with continued civilian support of special operations, would force the necessity of autonomous SOF. The next chapter, then, shows how SOF, through U.S. Special Operations Command, became a vital part of U.S. security strategy on several levels, and why, ultimately, they were forced to undergo their latest strategic innovation by becoming a preventive threat after 11 September 2001.

-6-

Utilizing then Coalescing the Capability: The Strategic Roles of Modern SOF from Multifarious to Unified

When the cold war ended, and for approximately twelve years that followed, the United States did not need to focus on balancing against another geopolitical superpower or major military threat. Furthermore, until the 1990s, SOF strategy could only be analyzed in the light of ongoing innovation. Before then, the capability was never stable and so discussion of their use was clouded by the problem of their solidification in the military. After the cold war, it became possible to analyze their strategic significance alone. From 1989 through 2001, the capabilities, funding, and doctrine of SOF stayed relatively consistent, with small, steady growth, even as the military in general suffered deep budget cuts following the cold war and Gulf War.²¹⁷ Obviously, there were still some skirmishes over the extension of SOF power, but the organization had relatively stable permanence.²¹⁸

The first part of this chapter outlines the strategic role that SOF played in this time period through a categorical analysis. After 11 September 2001, the SOF capability underwent an evolution nearly as significant as it had in the 1980s. USSOCOM would coalesce all of the capabilities it developed and perfected in the 1990s under one war as SOF emerged as the leaders of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Additionally, special operations in the U.S. would move from a purely responsive capability to a

²¹⁷ David Isenberg, "Special Forces: Shock Troops for the New Order," *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 177 (July-August, 1992), p. 25.

²¹⁸ For discussion of the bureaucratic battles, see the closing chapters of Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

partially preventive capability. The second part of the chapter discusses the implications of the latest innovation of SOF and also analyzes the present role of special operations in the GWOT. A conclusion to the entire paper, at the end of this chapter, will look back through the evolution of the SOF capability in a search for lessons about their strategic use in an attempt to provide recommendations for the present and future utilization of SOF in U.S. security strategy.

Part One: The Precisely Strategic Roles of Modern SOF, 1989-2001

In the post-cold war security situation through 2001 where most tangible threats were posed by several different types of low-level problems, SOF allowed policy makers to tailor a precise military response to specific security situations. Indeed, SOF went on many high-risk, tactically difficult but broadly unimportant missions. This thesis does not focus on those “Rambo”-type missions, however.²¹⁹ More importantly, SOF in this period offered a strategically precise, purely responsive capability. As a precise capability, the strategic use of SOF in the 1990s came in addressing proliferated threats when no single enemy was present. Despite the lack of a well-defined enemy, there was no “Void in the necessity for potent U.S. military forces.”²²⁰ In terms of their definition as a precise strategic threat as opposed to conventional forces, special operations “Employ at times the bare minimum of manpower and equipment to achieve disproportionately greater payoffs that may be crucial to high policy.”²²¹

²¹⁹ There are several books and action movies about these types of missions. For a discussion of these specific types of operations, see Richard Marcinko with John Weisman, *Rogue Warrior* (New York: Pocket, 1993); SMSgt. Jack Brehm with Pete Nelson; *That Others May Live* (Pittsburgh, PA: Three Rivers Press, 2001) among others. The Discovery-Times and History channels also have a wide selection of documentaries about isolated commando missions such as these.

²²⁰ Carl W. Stiner, “U.S. Special Operations Forces: A Strategic Perspective,” *Parameters* (Summer, 1992), p. 2.

²²¹ Steven Lambakis, “‘Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World’: The Contributions of Special Operations to Victory,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April-June, 1994), p. 211.

Given the organizational framework established in the previous chapter, and the strategic necessity of a smaller-sized force established above, SOF were tasked with several types of missions on the tactical level as a low-level military capability to counter low-level security threats: “Direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs, psychological operations, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue, [and] such other activities as may be specified by the President or SecDef.”²²² Keeping the varied types of threats in mind, SOF are essential in the adaptability of their force to meet many different strategic ends. “The true value of special operation forces to the United States lies in their ability to perform at different levels of conflict, independently and in conjunction with larger operations.”²²³ SOF can be tailored precisely by U.S. policy and strategy to counter different types of belligerents.²²⁴ The first part of this chapter will analyze five categories detailing how the United States used SOF’s new organization and numerous tactical missions as precisely-tailored and oftentimes highly effective tools of U.S. strategy. Each category will be accompanied by an illustrative case (or cases, when necessary) as tools of analysis. Both the categories and the case studies often overlap.

(1) The first category of strategic special operations will be spearheading then assisting conventional ground campaigns. There are several strategic benefits to sending in special operations before conventional forces, especially in the context of low-intensity (LICs) and medium-intensity conflicts. Operation Just Cause in Panama will be the case study for an SOF-led LIC; Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm will assess the role of

²²² Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), pp. 145-146.

²²³ Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” p. 211.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

SOF in leading a medium-intensity conflict. The role of SOF in humanitarian intervention in Somalia as part of Operation Restore Hope will show the negative strategic implications of using SOF after conventional forces,

(2) The next role of SOF deals with their use in mostly non-violent situations. When use of force is to be avoided, SOF are often more delicate than conventional forces, and so can be more useful in nonviolent humanitarian efforts. Operation Uphold/Restore Democracy in Haiti will be used as an example of this.

(3) SOF in the 1990s were often used as a strategically acute threat; conventional forces, alternatively, offer a strategically obtuse threat in several cases. This deals with cases in which SOF alone are used as direct tools of policy when the use of conventional ground forces is unwanted. SOF were an acute capability in the sense that they allowed policy makers to force a military solution on a little problem without applying so much force as to extend the conflict to a strategically undesirable amount. Conventional ground forces presented an obtuse capability in the sense that it would be difficult to minimally escalate a small conflict when employing a large ground force. This can be explicitly seen in the role of U.S. SOF in supporting several NATO or UN-run coalitions for humanitarian intervention in the 1990s. Operation Allied Force in the Balkans will serve as an example of this type of SOF action.

(4) Beyond limiting escalation of conflict to a strategically desirable level, the low profile kept by most SOF allows even a strategic *extension* of a conflict to reach policy goals without suffering political consequences; conflict extension by the obtuse conventional threat often carries heavy political consequences. Anti-drug operations in

Colombia that also served (and still serve) to accommodate broader policy objectives will be used as an example of this delicate conflict extension.

(5) The final characterization of the strategic use of SOF in the 1990s deals with their support of strategic air campaigns. There will be a lot of overlap between this category and previous ones, but it warrants a separate analysis. For several reasons through the 1990s, the United States chose strategic air bombing as the predominant military method to reach policy objectives, especially in joint military actions with NATO. SOF had a unique way of contributing to strategic bombing campaigns that will be discussed with the previously-used cases of the Gulf War and Operation Allied Force in the Balkans.

Role 1: SOF as the Leading Elements of Conventional Campaigns

Be they mostly conventional or mostly unconventional conflicts, all of the military actions of the United States except for the Gulf War (a medium-intensity conflict) in this time period were low-intensity conflicts. As such, a framework for why SOF are used in LICs in this time period must be established. After that is done, each specific section will explain the strategic nuances of each respective conflict (the section on the Gulf War, for example, will explain the strategic utility of SOF in support of a larger, medium-intensity conventional campaign). Note that many of the situations discussed are similar and hence most of the strategic implications noted have more breadth than just one of the discussed cases.

To begin, LICs, in whatever policy objective they sought, were paramount to U.S. security strategy through this time period. In his 1991-1992 *National Security Strategy*, President George Bush stated that a primary policy goal of the United States was to

establish “A stable and secure world, where political and economic freedom, human rights, and democratic institutions flourish.”²²⁵ The United States would intervene in foreign lands to promote all of these outlined conflicts; clearly, conventional operations that show a large force presence do not go far to promote institutions such as human rights, political and economic freedom, or democracy.

It would seem that U.S. intervention is quite altruistic. Realistically, however, there are hard political objectives usually sought via this type of intervention. These types of LICs

Are fought in those areas where we perceive our security or interests are imperiled...[those interests include] considerations of trade, resources, access and basing, protection of our citizens, elimination of criminal elements, maintenance of a regional balance of power, or sustaining a government favorable to our country or to the governments of our allies.²²⁶

In general,

The advantages special operations forces bring to this particular field of battle are obvious. Their small size makes them ideal for escape and evasion, enables them to be highly mobile once deployed, facilitates their insertion into and evacuation from the field of action, and improves the chances that their activities can be performed clandestinely where necessary. Clearly, a single-mission event may be of high political importance and, therefore, may require a highly controllable and disciplined fighting force.²²⁷

A necessary condition for an intervention to promote human rights, economic freedom, or political freedom is that the nation being “attacked” is politically or economically unstable or does not grant the most basic of human rights to its people. That is a very politically unstable situation—a delicate force such as SOF can be more useful in that situation than an obtrusive conventional force.

²²⁵ President George Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States, 1991-1992* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, Inc., 1991), p. 15.

²²⁶ Richard Szafranski, “Thinking About Small Wars,” *Parameters* (September, 1990), p. 40.

²²⁷ Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” p. 218.

In assessing Operation Just Cause in Panama, and Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, it is necessary to ask why, in particular, SOF were used to somewhat violently spearhead and then assist a conventional campaign in these a low-intensity conflicts? First, “The enemy fears elite units the most,” and thus SOF can help to overwhelm him into a quick and tidy surrender, minimizing the risk put on all operations.²²⁸ Second, LICs usually take place in Third World nations where the United States, for strategic reasons, does not wish to harm the infrastructure of an already badly bruised nation.²²⁹ “If among the rules of engagement is the requirement for no collateral damage, it will be necessary to use only the forces capable of meeting such stringent requirements.”²³⁰ Third, the United States oftentimes finds itself combating clans and militia in its interventions. They do not have the financing to provide for advanced technology.²³¹ As such, most of the first steps of interventions are night-time incursions against enemies who do not have night-vision capabilities; then, as the invasion begins, the emphasis is usually put on the speed and mobility provided by the technology and small size of SOF to carry out attack.²³² Fourth, because SOF are small, they are able to quickly transition to a peace-keeping force from a fighting force²³³, and thus help to hastily end a conflict. This will be seen especially in Panama.

SOF offer three capabilities when leading both medium-intensity conflicts and LICs in support of conventional forces. First is the ability of SOF to carry out high-risk, policy-intensive direct action missions that are tactically limited to one important

²²⁸ Szafranski, “Thinking About Small Wars,” p. 45.

²²⁹ R. Cody Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: The Incursion into Panama*, Brochure (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1990), Introduction.

²³⁰ Szafranski, “Thinking About Small Wars,” p. 45.

²³¹ Patrick Gilkes, “From Peace-Keeping to Peace Enforcement: The Somalia Precedent,” *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 185 (November-December, 1993), p. 23.

²³² Szafranski, “Thinking About Small Wars,” p. 45.

²³³ Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: The Incursion into Panama*, Introduction.

objective.²³⁴ In LICs, that is usually an attempt to disable the leader of an unsavory government; in medium-intensity conflicts, the mission objective can have deeper geopolitical consequences than the displacement of a leader. Second, SOF can offer outstanding special reconnaissance; coming from men on the ground, the intelligence provided by SOF is oftentimes more useful than that of electronic means of intelligence to the point that SOF intelligence significantly contributes to conventional success in a campaign.²³⁵ Third, SOF run psychological operations (PSYOP) that often contribute to success.

Turning next to the first Gulf War, how can SOF play a strategic role in medium-intensity conflicts (MICs)? In contrast to LICs, in MICs, there is an organized military to combat. In assisting a conventional military force that is fighting a standing army, SOF are not well-used in regular infantry support. That was established in World War II. However, SOF can act as a force multiplier “By diverting enemy forces to fight tactically unimportant battles or to occupy strategically marginal territory.” In that way, special operations can tie down a good amount of enemy resources, making the fight easier for conventional forces. Considering how much SOF are feared and respected, this works well.²³⁶

CASE: PANAMA

Panama’s leader, General Manuel Noriega, had a long history of inciting anti-U.S. sentiments in his nation. He had harassed American military personnel stationed there for several years before the United States invaded his country. The U.S. had

²³⁴ William Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets*, Research Brief (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), p. 2.

²³⁵ Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” pp. 218-219; Stiner, “U.S. Special Operations Forces: A Strategic Perspective,” pp. 8-10.

²³⁶ Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” pp. 213, 215.

diplomatically forced Panama to hold democratic elections; when Noriega's handpicked successor was defeated, however, the General assumed power as a dictator. After one of his military leaders staged a failed coup attempt, the country suffered widespread unrest. As Noriega declared a state of war on 16 December 1989, a U.S. Marine officer was shot and killed at a roadblock. The United States would invade just after midnight on 20 December 1989, stating its objectives as "Safeguarding American lives, defending democracy in Panama, combating drug trafficking, and protecting the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty." Strategically, the United States sought to stabilize the Third World as the cold war wound down.²³⁷ In terms of SOF, this operation was important in that it was USSOCOM's first chance to show off its joint capability in a major campaign since its inception in 1987.

In terms of reaching its strategic objectives, and in terms of SOF helping to reach those objectives, the operation was greatly successful. Importantly for the staying power of SOF, "Operations involved unprecedented coordination between conventional and special operations forces."²³⁸ In the war plan, SOF were to be employed at night, quickly, efficiently, and violently. Before the invasion, an Army SF team extracted an American from a Panamanian prison—this was an attempt to meet the policy objective of keeping Americans safe.²³⁹ Joint SOF teams are credited with collecting the intelligence key in successfully neutralizing 27 targets as the mission began and securing strategic

²³⁷ Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: The Incursion into Panama*, pp. 5-9.

²³⁸ Jennifer Morrison Taw, *Operation Just Cause: Lessons for Operations Other Than War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), p. 1.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

areas such as airfields. Additionally, SOF teams helped to capture Noriega, though that effort was largely diplomatic.²⁴⁰

Most notable is the extent to which SOF helped to quickly resolve the conflict and then stabilize the nation. “Within 72 hours of the outbreak of hostilities, all major combat operations ended. U.S. forces quickly shifted over from the role of war fighters to that of peacekeepers.”²⁴¹ Then, “After the operation, SOF language skills and regional expertise proved essential in the stability and later reconstruction operations.”²⁴² The success of this operation, given its timing just six weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was important in the message it sent to the unstable nations of the Third World.

CASE: SOMALIA

If the invasion of Panama helped the United States to stabilize and ally itself with the Third World, as well as set a high precedent for future interventions, Operation Deliver Hope in Somalia helped to destabilize Third World Africa, upset the American public, and set up a situation where African intervention was not possible as a policy option in the near future. The failure of this special operation had horrible strategic consequences; though it achieved some tactical success, ignored elements of the basic LIC theory laid out above led the operation to a horrible strategic failure.

Somalia was a nation controlled by warlords. The UN commissioned a U.S.-led peacekeeping force to stop these warlords from taking UN food shipments and blackmailing food for political support. SOF were responsible for running operations in the country side, whereas conventional forces ran the operations in cities. Peacekeeping

²⁴⁰ Stiner, “U.S. Special Operations Forces: A Strategic Perspective,” pp. 8-9.

²⁴¹ Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: The Incursion into Panama*, Introduction.

²⁴² Taw, *Operation Just Cause: Lessons for Operations Other Than War*, p. 13.

is mostly nonviolent²⁴³, and this peaceable operation was not working very well. As such, the UN changed the role of the peacekeepers to peace enforcers, providing military forces of the now 21-nation coalition the ability to protect themselves by “all means necessary.” By the middle months of 1993, there were 17,000 peace enforcers in Somalia.²⁴⁴

Mohammed Fara Aidid was the most powerful warlord in Somalia, and the Habr Gadr was his daunting militia. Operating in the capital of Mogadishu, Aidid’s Habr Gadr killed 24 Pakistani soldiers; they then killed four American journalists and dragged their bodies through the streets. The UN and U.S. had begun a large conventional campaign; that campaign was so large that it incited the perception among Somalis that they were under attack.²⁴⁵

Then, only after the conventional campaign was underway, did President Clinton’s new SecDef, Les Aspin, call for a joint special operations task force (JSOTF) assigned to carry out the high-risk, policy intensive mission of snatching Aidid. Due to the timing of this operation after the conventional campaign, it was impossible for the United States to maintain a low profile either among the media at home or among the people of Somalia. The large conventional campaign had joined together an enemy willing to fight for their homeland.²⁴⁶

SOF were being used after a slow conventional campaign and their use clandestinely was essentially out of the question. Thus, when a prisoner snatch from 3-4

²⁴³ Dr. Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994*, Brochure (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2003), pp. 12-15.

²⁴⁴ Ramesh Thakur, “From Peacekeeping to Peace Enforcement: The UN Operation in Somalia,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (September, 1994), pp. 393-396.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

²⁴⁶ Stewart, *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994* pp. 16 -17.

October 1993 failed, it was no surprise. Their post-conventional deployment mitigated the advantages that SOF presented in tactically fighting LIC. 18 American JSOTF members were killed, and some of their bodies were dragged through the streets for the American public to see on CNN; it was not very low-profile.

Generally, “Public intolerance of casualties radically constrains the government’s ability to use armed force effectively to defend national interests and to maintain a more peaceful world order.”²⁴⁷ Clandestine SOF can help the U.S. to reach these policy goals without needing to keep the public widely informed. Thus, after the 18 soldiers died in Mogadishu, and their mutilated bodies were shown on CNN, public opinion forced President Clinton to withdraw U.S. forces from Somalia.²⁴⁸

The large conventional campaign incited the Habr Gadr militia to a combined form of violence. The failure to spearhead the operation with the violent JSOTF in the first place, coupled with the capability of the militia and the American intolerance for casualties, led the United States to not be able to reach its Third World policy goals. More importantly, this would hinder future policy options. Only a year later, the incident in Mogadishu was fresh in President Clinton’s mind as he failed to send any military coalition in an attempt to halt the genocide that killed over a million people in another African nation: Rwanda. Clearly, it is imperative to U.S. low-level security strategy that SOF spearhead LICs.

CASE: GULF WAR

In spearheading the medium-intensity conflict in Iraq in 1991, SOF supported conventional victory and the U.S. policy of stabilizing the Middle East via

²⁴⁷ James Burk, “Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 53-78.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

reconnaissance, diversion, and PSYOP missions. SOF also took on a singular, high-risk, policy-intensive mission that widely secured the U.S. interest of Middle Eastern stability. After the war ended, Army Special Forces continued to help ensure stability, especially for Kuwait.

Before the campaign began, all SOF elements operated to provide intelligence along the borders of Iraq with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. As the conventional campaign began, SOF helped by providing real-time intelligence to conventional leaders in battle.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, Navy SEALs diverted large amounts of Iraqi regular forces. Iraqis thought an amphibious assault was looming; as such, Navy SEALs set charges in buoys in the water and snuck onto the beach to set up for an apparently amphibious landing. The main assault came from the south and west, but this diversion brought two Iraqi divisions to the east, thereby eliminating their ability to defend the main assault.²⁵⁰

Additionally, “After the cease-fire, an Iraqi division commander stated that, next to coalition bombing campaigns, PSYOP was the greatest threat to his troops’ morale.” PSYOP campaigns encouraged mass surrender and desertion, and Iraqi forces’ actions show the effect that PSYOP had.²⁵¹

The most strategically important mission of SOF in the fight itself was in locating Saddam Hussein’s Scud missiles. Hussein had sent a few harmless Scuds into Israel in January 1991. Aerial reconnaissance had trouble locating and destroying these missiles. “Although they inflicted little damage, the Scud attacks threatened to draw Israel into the ongoing Persian Gulf Conflict. Any Israeli military action would have destroyed the

²⁴⁹ *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, Final Report to Congress (April, 1992), J-10, J-11.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, J-14.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, J-20-J-21.

fragile Arab coalition that had been forged against Iraq.”²⁵² It was reported that U.S. SOF helped to identify 29 of these Scud launchers behind enemy lines with the help of the British SAS.²⁵³ A Pentagon study would later say that SOF did not destroy this many missiles; it may not have achieved complete tactical success, but “The Scud-hunting campaign...ultimately dissuaded Israel from entering the Persian Gulf War, thereby meeting its key strategic objective of preserving the Arab coalition.”²⁵⁴

Finally, leading up to and following the war, Army Green Berets helped to maintain area stability by training and building up the Kuwaiti military. They were the primary advisors to the Kuwaiti military at all levels. “At the end of August, the Kuwaitis had less than two functional brigades. By February, they had been reequipped and special forces teams had trained elements of six brigades.”²⁵⁵

Role 2: SOF Leading Mostly Nonviolent Campaigns

There are five reasons why SOF are helpful in promoting relatively nonviolent LICs. First, “SOF are particularly adept at national assistance tasks that require cultural familiarity, linguistic skills, and a long-term commitment.”²⁵⁶ SOF are delicate and more adept at delicately understanding the sentiments of the people in the downtrodden nations that the U.S. intervenes in; this understanding becomes particularly important when the United States is making an attempt to speak without weapons. Second, just as SOF are capable of quickly transitioning from a violent force to a peacekeeping force, they can

²⁵² Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets*, p. 2.

²⁵³ Benjamin F. Schemmer, “Special Ops Teams Found 29 Scuds Ready to Barrage Israel 24 Hours Before Cease-Fire,” *Armed Forces Journal International* (July, 1991), p. 36.

²⁵⁴ Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets*, p. 2.

²⁵⁵ *Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm*, Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 375. Here, a USSOCOM officer, Col. James A. Kingsley, is quoted.

²⁵⁶ General Carl W. Stiner, “The Strategic Employment of Special Operations Forces,” *Military Review* (June, 1991), p. 6.

just as easily make the transition from peacekeepers to war fighters. If the situation dictates quick military action, SOF are more adaptable than conventional forces. Third, though the actions are “nonviolent,” security must still be established. SOF are more likely to have the ability to abide by stringent rules of engagement while still maintaining security. Fourth, these types of operations are generally associated with nation-building. The Army lists nine military tasks to support nation-building including, among others: coordinating coalitions, intelligence, and support for or with local and regional allies; commanding local armed forces; and providing operational security. Army SF are the only group in the military capable in themselves of accomplishing all nine tasks.²⁵⁷ Fifth, intervening non-violently usually means the training of international forces, a job for which Army Green Berets are specifically tailored.

CASE: HAITI

The operations in Haiti, named Operation Uphold/Restore Democracy, largely utilized Army SF as they supported the international coalition and nation-building there. The intervention became necessary as the democratically-elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown in a coup, causing a mass exodus of refugees to the Dominican Republic and United States.²⁵⁸ The operation there had three strategic objectives: “To restore democracy in Haiti; to eliminate the refugee problem; and to enhance the credibility of the U.S., the U.N., and the Organization of American States (OAS).”²⁵⁹ SF were vital in

²⁵⁷ Major Jeffrey J. Monte, *The Role of Army Special Operations Forces in Nation Building*, Thesis to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (1993), p. 35, Table 1, and p. 50, Table 2.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁵⁹ Major Kenneth E. Tovo, “Special Forces Mission Focus for the Future,” *Special Warfare*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December, 1996), p. 7.

preparing all of the multinational forces for missions and served as the main military advisors to all members of the multinational effort.²⁶⁰

At the outset, Army SF went into Haiti to establish security and did so with minimal bloodshed. SF developed a relationship with Haitians that allowed them to move freely throughout the country and keep order; once they established security, SF changed to a different role (Rangers were used as a quick reaction security force once SF established initial security). The most important of their missions came in supporting democracy and human rights—in other words, in directly supporting the nation-building mission. “SF personnel gave civic lessons, held town meetings, and forced judges to preside over cases where suspects were being held without trial.”²⁶¹

Role 3: The Acute Threat

The role of SOF in the Balkans, in large part, deals with their special form of aid to strategic bombing campaigns. Beyond this role, Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999 is a good tool for analysis of SOF on three levels: first, as an acute force escalator; second, as a bastion of neutrality in ethnic conflict; third, as promoters, specifically, of human rights. All three of these require the application of SOF as a strategically acute threat. A strategically acute military threat is defined here as one that can be tailored to meet specific policy objectives without extending the conflict to an undesirable level or compromising other strategic objectives. In other words, a strategically acute military threat limits geopolitical collateral damage.

When SOF are used as acute escalators of force, they are a direct instrument of policy. This is applicable on two levels. First, “A state may undertake special operations

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁶¹ Monte, *The Role of Army Special Operations Forces in Nation Building*, pp. 56-60.

to control the intensity and scope of a conflict.”²⁶² In this way, SOF serve as a middle ground of escalation between diplomacy and conventional attack, or (as was shown by Operation White Star in Laos in the late 1950s) lend military credence to diplomacy via low-level actions simultaneous to that diplomacy. This aspect of the diplomatic role of SOF can be most candidly seen in the current war in Afghanistan; as such, the role will be discussed in the part of the chapter covering SOF’s role in the GWOT.

Second, SOF can be used as the final instrument of policy following a larger campaign. “SOF may be employed to provide a very low ceiling of violence or perhaps to bring about the end of a crisis.”²⁶³ Strategically, this second type of acute escalation capability explains how SOF help to resolve ethnic conflict. It would sound as if SOF used in this sense are not spearheading and thus doomed to the same failures as they were in Somalia in 1993. As will be discussed later, SOF in this role are most often utilized after strategic air campaigns that have destroyed the morale of the opposing force; this is unlike Somalia where an unsuccessful conventional ground campaign only incited the fighting force.

Why SOF are good at dealing with ethnic conflict is simple. Green Berets especially are good at infiltrating and understanding a culture and thus understanding an ethnicity’s grievances. Second, in situations of ethnic oppression, after the ethnic cleanser has been stopped, SOF are responsible enough to make sure that the ethnically cleansed do not start another conflict.

Situations of ethnic conflict are oftentimes synonymous with human rights offenses. SOF are particularly good at promoting human rights. The motto of Army SF

²⁶² Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” p. 217.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

is “*De Oppresso Liber*”—Latin for “Freedom from the Oppressor.” In that light, all SF that deploy outside of the U.S. are extensively trained in the promotion of human rights. SOF in general stress human rights. The commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) stated that “I can tell you that Special Forces soldiers will...continue to serve as the *conscience and the example of lesser developed nations regarding human rights*.” This is true to the point that Army SF host other nations specifically for human rights training.²⁶⁴

CASE: KOSOVO

Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic entered Kosovo and began committing acts of ethnic cleansing, forcing the ethnic Albanian Muslims living in Kosovo (a large majority of the population) to become refugees in the bordering nations of Albania and Macedonia. From March to June, 1999, the U.S. and NATO allies engaged in a major military strategic bombing campaign to stop Milosevic. The U.S. sought three primary policy interests in the campaign: Ensuring the stability of Eastern Europe; Thwarting ethnic cleansing; and Ensuring NATO’s capability.²⁶⁵

SOF would most importantly be on the ground well after June, 1999 in a well-orchestrated campaign that highlighted their use as a direct tool of policy in conflict resolution. Specifically here, they were acutely used to help meet the policy goal of conflict resolution in ethnic conflict.²⁶⁶ Diplomacy was a two-part endeavor in Kosovo.

²⁶⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey F. Addicott, “Special Forces and the Promotion of Human Rights,” *Special Warfare*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December, 1996), p. 35.

²⁶⁵ Secretary of Defense William H. Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry H. Shelton, “Message From SecDef and CJCS,” *Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report*, Report to Congress, Unclassified Version (31 January 2000), p. 1.

²⁶⁶ It should be noted that all of the primary governmental sources on the matter that are available to the public are unclassified, and for reasons of current operational security in similar missions, these documents do not specifically mention the phrase “special operations forces.” The documents speak generally about

Before Operation Allied Force began, there was an attempt to nonviolently end Milosevic's ethnic cleansing; during and especially after the violent part of the campaign ended, "The diplomatic objective was to prevent the conflict from widening."²⁶⁷ To this end, there was a need for "Force capabilities that can handle unexpected circumstances and threats across the full range of military options...for forces that are able to adapt and transition across diverse operations calling for combat, peace enforcement, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance."²⁶⁸

Army SF would fit this bill perfectly. Region-specific Green Beret operational units are referred to as A-teams, short for Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA). In the Balkans, the bulk of the conflict resolution capability fell on ODA 563. Ethnic Albanians, obviously, were not too happy after having been oppressed. A guerilla group called the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA) formed as a resistance to the Serbians. The downfall of Milosevic, coupled with the fact that SOF initially aided the KLA in training to help destroy certain Serbian ground targets²⁶⁹, could have created an environment permissive to Albanian backlash toward Serbians.

As SOF are quickly adaptable to changing strategy, however, ODA 563 was utilized to meet the strategic objective of not allowing extension of the conflict. The A-team interdicted several train shipments of arms and weapons caches in the mountains that were intended to end up in the hands of the KLA. Before and during Operation Allied Force, ODA 563 had been working to establish relationships in Albanian refugee

missions carried out that are classically SOF missions; henceforth, it is necessary to rely on secondary sources in an attempt to succinctly extrapolate the role of SOF.

²⁶⁷ *Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report*, Report to Congress, Unclassified Version (31 January 2000), p. 9.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁶⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons and Non-Lessons of the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies), p. 250.

camps and villages. They were able to use these relationships, their understanding of subtle Kosovar cultural nuances (For instance, it is an insult to talk to Kosovar Muslim women; SF troops gathered intelligence from only males, no matter how young), and their experience with the KLA, as primary sources of intelligence in conducting and coordinating village raids on guerillas and weapons stores.²⁷⁰ ODA 563 helped to disallow extension of the conflict once the primary sustained violence of the air campaign was finished.

Role #4: Acute Strategic Extension

SOF were utilized in many LICs that were not directly linked to high policy. Winning the war on drugs, for instance, was a low-level policy objective in the 1990s. SOF could be utilized acutely under the guise of solely combating drug armies, or narcoguerrillas. Conventional intercession to stop the flow of drugs into the United States was widely criticized due to the regional political fallout caused by the obtuse nature of large-scale war fighting.²⁷¹ SOF, a more delicate capability, can be precisely tailored to fight these types of specific conflicts without suffering political fallout. Even more, because SOF can be trusted to follow strict ROEs, while fighting these tactically acute conflicts, the United States has been able to utilize clandestine SOF to subtly aid higher regional policy objectives.

CASE: COLOMBIA

In 1999, the Colombian Government announced “Plan Colombia,” a \$7.5 billion effort whose specific goal was to cut the Colombian drug trade in half over five years.

²⁷⁰ Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 147-150.

²⁷¹ Lieutenant Colonel John T. Fishel, “Developing a Drug War Strategy: Lessons from Operation Blast Furnace,” *Military Review* (June, 1991), pp. 61-69.

The United States pledged \$3.5 billion to this effort, as well as a significant contingent of SOF support.²⁷² SOF had been operating in Colombia, however, throughout the 1990s. Though the specific plan was to limit the drug trade, SOF have helped to reach a number of larger strategic objectives.

In Latin America, the United States has classically sought important regional policy goals. “U.S. policy toward Latin America [has demonstrated] that the Panama Canal and the sea lanes connecting the east and west coasts of the continental United States must remain in U.S. or friendly hands.”²⁷³ In the past, that meant stopping extra-continental powers from entering Latin America; since the end of the Cold War, however, that strategy has “Given way to countering non-territorial threats from ‘hostile’ or ‘disruptive’ hemispheric governments and political actors.”²⁷⁴

Concerning Colombia specifically, “The national interests at stake for the United States are central to our well-being as a society, to regional security and international order, and to the future of economic integration within a democratic framework for the Americas.”²⁷⁵ In Colombia, the drug trade is deeper than simply selling drugs for money—it is a political entity. Political insurgents in Colombia defend the drug trade in return for financing; politically-motivated (Communist and Fascist) insurgent guerilla tactics give rise to self-defense paramilitary groups. Hence, combating drug-defending guerillas “Is nothing less than a grand strategy for remaking Columbia into a dignified

²⁷² Jess T. Ford, Director of International Affairs and Trade, United States General Accounting Office, *Drug Control: Challenges in Implementing Plan Colombia*, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources (Washington, D.C.: United States General Accounting Office, 2000), p. 1.

²⁷³ Max G. Manwaring, “Why Colombia, Why Now, and What is to be Done?” (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 4.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁷⁵ Gabriel Marcella, “Plan Colombia: An Introduction,” *Plan Colombia: Some Differing Perspectives* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 1.

and stable democracy...that will not succeed unless there is a security shield.”²⁷⁶ At any time, between 300-500 SOF are in Colombia to meet the national security concerns produced by the drug war. A higher force presence than this would give too much traction to political insurgents. Army SF operate in advising and training the Colombian military to combat guerillas. Additionally, SOF helicopters are used in combat missions.²⁷⁷ CIA operatives and elite military task forces attack the drug trade from the top down in widely assisting in attempts to capture and kill drug kingpins that run the destabilizing cartels.²⁷⁸ SOF are used to specifically combat a drug trade in Colombia; while doing so they are fighting an enemy that “Produces adverse social effects that undermine the sovereignty, democracy, stability, well-being, and security of all the countries of the Western Hemisphere.”²⁷⁹ Hence, SOF are delicately escalating the strategic importance of the conflict as they help attain several policy objectives beyond just stopping the drug trade.

Role #5: In Support of Strategic Bombing

The Gulf War showed a continued tradition of strategic aerial bombing in support of medium-intensity conflict. Through the 1990s, strategic bombing in LIC became a primary tool of American policymakers. This was so for several specific reasons, but the basic assumption that led to strategic change is that aerial bombing began to be seen as a tool of coercion, or “A threat to inflict pain on the target if the target does not accede to a

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Charles E. Wilhelm, “A View from Washington,” *Some Differing Perspectives* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 13.

²⁷⁸ Michael Kenney, “From Pablo to Osama: Counter-terrorism Lessons from the War on Drugs,” *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 187, 192.

²⁷⁹ “Why Colombia, Why Now, and What is to be Done?,” p. 7.

demand”²⁸⁰ even in situations of low-level intervention. The use of this type of strategic bombing in both types of conflict increased exponentially in the 1990s for two empirical reasons: Unbelievable technological advances in precision-guided munitions decreased collateral damage; and Not using ground forces caused a large decrease in U.S. and allied casualties that Washington was largely unwilling to stomach.²⁸¹

CASES: GULF WAR AND KOSOVO

In the 1990s and into the present, air power and SOF became very appealing to U.S. strategists. “To put it succinctly: Air Power + Special Operations Forces + Local Proxies = Low-Risk Win. That has been the increasingly clear message of the last decade”²⁸² That is a formula that the United States put to use in reaching its objectives in Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999. In Iraq, frequent bombings helped the United States by ruining Iraq’s infrastructure and accomplishing high policy objectives without risking ground forces. In Kosovo, there was much debate over whether the U.S.-led coalition employed the proper scheme of coercively bombing.²⁸³ Despite the argument over its proper use, coercive strategic bombing was U.S. policy in Kosovo and it did compel Milosevic to withdraw Serbian forces from the region at the cost of not a single NATO or U.S. life.²⁸⁴ In both of these campaigns, SOF played a vital role in strategic bombing in

²⁸⁰ Michael Horowitz and Dan Reiter, “When Does Aerial Bombing Work?: Quantitative Empirical Tests, 1917-1999,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (April, 2001), p. 148.

²⁸¹ Charles Knight, Lutz Untersherer, and Carl Conetta, “Reflections on Information War, Casualty Aversion, and Military Research and Development After the Gulf War and the Demise of the Soviet Union,” Project on Defense Alternatives, <<http://www.comw.org/pda/0003refl.html>.

²⁸² Jeffrey Record, “A Strategy-Budget Mismatch?,” *Defense Week*, Vol. 23, No. 7 (11 February 2002), p. 16.

²⁸³ Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, “Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring, 2000), pp. 5-38.

²⁸⁴ Paul E. Gallis, *Kosovo: Lessons Learned from Operation Allied Force*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 19 November 1999), p. 5.

four ways: Target reconnaissance and assessment; Destruction of enemy air defenses; Securing people on the ground; and Combat Search and Rescue.

Over the last few years, just watching television (the “Shock and Awe” campaign over Baghdad) is enough to inform the viewer that Americans begin wars by bombing its enemy aerially. Before that happens, SOF provide reconnaissance for and mark targets for the bomber pilots and strategists who choose targets, and use their unique clandestine abilities to go behind enemy lines and help destroy their air defenses.

Aerial reconnaissance is often useful, but it is not completely reliable. SOF are used to fill in aerial and satellite intelligence gaps. In Iraq, “U.S. special operations before and during the Persian Gulf War included missions along the Kuwait-Saudi border and deep inside Iraq to fill in the intelligence gaps” left by reconnaissance satellites and aircraft.²⁸⁵ In Kosovo, British and American SOF embedded with KLA forces in Albania “Provided NATO aircraft with targeting data.”²⁸⁶

These same forces in Kosovo helped to destroy strategic Serbian air defenses.²⁸⁷ SOF operated to a larger effect in destroying Iraqi air defenses in 1991. Low-flying Air Force SOF helicopters flew underneath Iraqi radar to destroy key Iraqi radar sites on the Saudi-Iraqi border.²⁸⁸

One flaw of coercive air power is that it cannot coerce by itself and that, once it does coerce, air power cannot be used to solve a power vacuum; in other words, a strategically successful air campaign is contingent upon the ability of other forces to

²⁸⁵ Lambakis, ““Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,”” p. 215.

²⁸⁶ Cordesman, *The Lessons and Non-Lessons of the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo*, p. 250.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

²⁸⁸ *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, Final Report to Congress, J-13-J-14.

control the situation on the ground.²⁸⁹ To a certain extent, then, the flaw is manifest by its success: a good strategic bombing campaign, especially in terms of humanitarian intervention, will leave a power vacuum as it unseats an unsavory leader or political group. As discussed in the section solely devoted to Operation Allied Force, Army SF have a unique ability to help in ethnic conflict resolution. This is especially true in the power vacuum left by a successful strategic bombing campaign.

Finally, Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR)—the rescuing of downed pilots and a role attributed to SOF, usually Air Force commandos—is an important factor in strategic bombing campaigns. The pilot, in these situations, becomes the hand of American policy; and, surely, there is a large amount of utility in making sure that hand is steady. Operationally, the rate of success of CSAR missions is minimal. In the Gulf War, for example, only three of the seven attempted CSAR missions were successful.²⁹⁰ Psychologically, however, there can be great effect. First, pilots operate more effectively when they know a rescue will be attempted should they crash. Second, strategic bombing can be sold to the American public because it limits casualties; at least the appearance that everything is done to save U.S. troops is helpful in keeping public opinion favorable.²⁹¹

Part Two: Coalescing SOF Capabilities

The events of 11 September 2001 vastly changed the security situation of the United States and changed the strategic nature of SOF. One of the low-level threats that SOF had been created to counter became the primary security threat to the United States.

²⁸⁹ Byman and Waxman, “Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate,” p. 7.

²⁹⁰ *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, Final Report to Congress, J-16.

²⁹¹ Tovo, “Special Forces Mission Focus for the Future,” p. 7.

SOF would innovate to become the most widely-used U.S. capability to combat the terrorist threat.

The first section in this part of the chapter outlines and defines what the modern terrorist threat is and why it is paramount in American security strategy in order to establish a framework for why SOF are used in combating it. The second section will explain the innovations that SOF has undergone and plans to undergo in order to combat terrorism. Finally, the third section explains how the United States has used these changes in SOF to combat terrorism.

Defining the Threat

The character of the modern terrorist threat dictates the use of SOF against it. Several characteristics make this so. It is a threat that uses the United States' extended presence in globalization as a weapon to recruit and execute attacks against the U.S.; It is motivated by religion and geopolitics and also thrives on impoverished and underdeveloped societies; It uses tactically and strategically sound weapons; It is supported by a complex financial structure and well-organized in autonomous cells that loosely follow the ideology of important leaders while at the same time making it difficult to capture many terrorists at once. There is a significant amount of overlap among the nature of all of these characterizations—specifically in the way terrorists use globalization to their benefit on many levels.

(1) The more global presence the United States shows, the easier it is for terrorists to attack American interests and the more traction they gain in recruiting members to their ideology. In history, terrorism was always done against empires and colonial

powers. More recently, it usually targets US-led globalization;²⁹² it has usually picked the easiest target. In the modern context, globalization has allowed terrorists to attack US interests abroad. The vast reach of the media and of internet technology—the technology that fuels globalization—has aided terrorist groups in their goal of instilling fear.²⁹³ Tools like e-mail improve communication. Tools like Al-Jazeera increase sympathy among targeted groups. Tools like CNN and internet news providers allow carnage to instill fear in vast audiences. This is the most rational way to attack Americans: it draws attention but does not always lead to immediate military intervention by greater military powers.

Additionally, part of globalization is a vast urbanization of both developed and developing nations. This has a two-fold effect utilized by terrorists. First, terrorists have a higher concentration of targets.²⁹⁴ Second, when Western powers do intervene to stop terrorists conventionally, specifically in the Middle East, it leads to urban warfare. Urban warfare mitigates the advantage of more advanced and larger militaries, it ensures that more westerners are killed, and most importantly, it ensures that interventions are long and exhaustive. The longer an outside state occupies a land, the more hate can be directed toward it and the easier it is for terrorist groups to garner sympathy.

This last aspect hints at the most important strategic aspect of the modern terrorist vis-à-vis globalization—the “brinksmanship” model. This is a paradoxical tool of terrorist coercion. By this model, low-level threats can challenge U.S. or Western interests abroad or at home, thereby inducing either the threat of intervention or

²⁹² Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter, 2002, 2003), p. 34.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁹⁴ Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (July, 1981), p. 382.

intervention itself. When this threat or intervention occurs, terrorists groups are able to garner support by appealing to sentiments of anti-Western grievances (grievances heightened by the extension of America in a globalized world). This sentiment is coupled with an appeal to heightened feelings of Arab nationalism and Islamic fanaticism against the West. In the end, terrorists use low-level threats to provoke intervention or the threat thereof, hence producing more anti-Western sentiment and gaining ideological traction.²⁹⁵

(2) It is motivated by religion, poverty, and geopolitics and, under the framework of globalization, all three motivations work together in framing the highly complex terrorist ideology in the modern world. Neither poverty, religion, nor politics provide necessary causes for terrorism, but all three, understood in terms of globalization, create an environment permissive to terrorist activity. It is a highly complex relationship that is difficult to succinctly explain, but the strategic effects of the interplay between all three motivations are gravely clear.

Terrorist organizations can manipulate globalization not only to help serve strategic militant purposes, but also to manipulate attitudes of people in the Middle East and other areas of high terrorist activities. "Al-Qaeda...is able to do so much harm because of the secondary support and sanctuary it receives in vast areas that have not experienced the ...benefits of globalization."²⁹⁶ By fighting the war versus the West, terrorist groups are able to curry favor with the peoples of these nations by presenting the absolute disparity between the haves (West) versus the have-nots (the people of developing nations). In framing the contradiction so starkly, terrorist groups purposely

²⁹⁵ Michael Doran, "The Pragmatic Fanaticism of al Qaeda: An Anatomy of Extremism in Middle Eastern Politics," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 117, No. 2 (July, 2002), pp. 185-187.

²⁹⁶ Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," p. 38.

allow hate for the West to fester.²⁹⁷ Modern technology and western influences abroad allow this message to sink in.

The religious ideology of the Muslim world puts America in a horrible strategic position. Islam dictates a theocratic government, so Islam and politics are inextricably linked. If America intervenes to provide democracy, it can be labeled as a Western institution; it thus provides more fodder for political-minded Arab nationalists.

“Religious terrorists are, by their very nature, largely motivated by religion, but they are also driven by day-to-day practical political considerations within their context-specific environment.” Hence, it is impossible to separate the political and religious motivations of terrorists.²⁹⁸

Also, religion allows terrorist strategists to have an important “diplomatic” advantage. Islamist terrorists like Osama bin Laden have religious grievances with both apostates (pro-Western Islamic nations) and idolaters (non-Islamic nations), and only support “properly” Islamic nations. In this light, people like bin Laden are able to publicly frame U.S. politico-military action as they see fit. As the U.S. maintains a military presence in Saudi Arabia for political reasons, terrorists can say the United States is aiding what is an apostate nation in Saudi Arabia that is a geopolitical danger as it is positioned in the Middle East. If the United States intervenes in an Islamist nation, bin Laden can say that the U.S. possesses an anti-Arab, anti-Islamic political ideology. When the United States does not intervene in areas like Indonesia or Chechnya, where

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁹⁸ Magnus Ranstorp, “Terrorism in the Name of Religion,” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Summer, 1996), p. 44.

Muslims are being killed, bin Laden can frame this geo-political action a “Willingness to tolerate, or even inflict, Muslim deaths.”²⁹⁹

These religious-politically motivated sentiments become entangled with sentiments of disenfranchisement spawned by the poverty that is so prevalent in parts of the world where the Islamic-political complex exists. This dangerous triumvirate cocktail provides a situation where the United States becomes strategically and ideologically damned by any action or inaction alike.

(3) It uses tactically and strategically sound weapons. Suicide terrorism is at the height of *terrorist* escalation. Terrorism has three levels: demonstrative, destructive, and suicide. After the terrorists have attempted to convey their message by appealing to others, suicide terrorism is the final limit. It is the mechanism by which the terrorist strategists use coercion as a tool. “The record of suicide terrorism from 1980 to 2001 exhibits tendencies in the timing, goals, and targets of attack that are consistent with this strategic logic but not with irrational or fanatical behavior.”³⁰⁰

In that light, then, suicide terrorism has worked as a coercive tool. According to Robert A. Pape, out of eleven suicide terrorist campaigns from 1980-2000, six of them were at least somewhat successful in reaching their strategic goals. Being somewhat successful in a campaign is based on the willingness of the opponent to be coerced.³⁰¹

The only way to deal with suicide terrorism, then, is to hit it head-on. The West, in the current context, will not give in to it. This means that even if their ultimate goal of

²⁹⁹ Daniel L. Byman, “Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?,” *World Politics*, No. 56 (October, 2003), pp. 144-145.

³⁰⁰ Robert A. Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *International Politics*, 7th Edition (New York: Pearson, 2005), p. 235.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

political coercion is not reached, terrorist groups still reach some strategic advantage under the “brinksmanship” model.

From a tactical standpoint, the suicide terrorist is a great weapon. It is impossible to forget that terrorist soldiers are skilled enough to fly planes into three national landmarks on U.S. soil—one of which is the home of the U.S. defense bureaucracy; and kill thousands of innocent Americans. In a broader sense, by the time a group reaches the point of suicide terrorism, “The victims or objects of terrorist attack have little intrinsic value...but represent a larger human audience whose reaction the terrorists seek.”³⁰² The greater the amount of death, the more fear incited and the larger the audience that will see the carnage in the media. If the suicide terrorist is on a bus, and that bus empties before he blows up, he can just move to the crowded coffee shop. A Scud missile does not have that capability. Ultimately, then, because of the rationality of the suicide terrorist—that is, his commitment to carry out the strategic objective of instilling fear through mass loss of life—the suicide terrorist is the most dangerous weapon of the terrorist organization.

Additionally, as terrorists groups become more prominent, they are able to technologically innovate. With more money and more personnel, they can gather new means of fighting, as well as sustain long-lasting campaigns, not just singular attacks.³⁰³

(4) It is supported by a complex financial structure and well-organized in autonomous cells that loosely follow the ideology of important leaders while at the same time making it difficult to capture many terrorists at once. Terrorist groups use the technology available from globalization to their advantage in this sense. The internet specifically has allowed terrorist groups to act with relative security. Using the internet

³⁰² Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” p. 379.

³⁰³ Byman, “Al-Qaeda as an Adversary,” pp. 142-143.

and new tools of communication, terrorist groups are able to act in cells. Should its enemies defeat one small cell, it is extremely difficult to find a link to the actual planner of the terrorist act. Using websites and the media as a whole, terrorist leadership is able to set up a highly complicated network whereby “Small cells and individuals are inspired to take action on their own.”³⁰⁴ Despite the disjointed nature of their organization, terrorist groups are still unified under and motivated by an Islamist ideology.³⁰⁵ Because of the disjointed nature of their organization, it is difficult to fight many different cells at once that operate alone and ignorant of one another.

In thinking of modern terrorists networks as a business, it is likewise difficult to track the sources of their financial backing. “It has become a vast enterprise—an international movement or franchise operation with like-minded local representatives, loosely connected to a central ideological or motivational base, but advancing their common goal independently of one another.”³⁰⁶

Strategically, the terrorist groups are a disjointed but global threat. As of 2004, it was projected that 18,000 terrorists trained in camps in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Today those “soldiers” are positioned in as many as 60 nations worldwide.³⁰⁷

The Changing Role of SOF

Between 2001 and the present, the SOF capability has been immensely changed in order to defeat the terrorist threat. It has quietly become a primary military tool of U.S. security strategy. The 2004 Unified Command Plan officially designated that

³⁰⁴ Jessica Stern, “Al Qaeda: The Protean Enemy,” *International Politics*, 7th Edition (New York: Pearson, 2005), pp. 434, 435.

³⁰⁵ Byman, “Al-Qaeda as an Adversary,” p. 149.

³⁰⁶ Bruce Hoffman, “The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (November-December, 2004), p. 552.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 552.

USSOCOM had the lead in the GWOT.³⁰⁸ As one Congressman put it, “Their role has moved from the tip of the spear to the entire thing.”³⁰⁹ It is with strategic special operations that the United States currently envisions winning the GWOT.

Several changes have taken place to solidify the role of SOF as paramount in U.S. security strategy. There are two major thematic, doctrinal changes: SOF have moved from a purely responsive capability to a partially preventive, partially responsive capability; and SOF have unified their mission under the GWOT. Five empirical changes have happened or are presently happening to support the thematic innovation. SOF have tried to do away with *ad hoc* task forces; USSOCOM has moved from a *supporting* combatant command to a *supported* combatant command³¹⁰; SOF personnel have increased in number; SOF funding has increased; and SOF power has extended into civilian bureaucracies, especially the intelligence bureaucracy.³¹¹

The terrorist threat is a serious one. No other enemy has been able to attack America’s homeland and, in doing so, kill thousands of civilians, destroy symbols of the United States’ economic freedom, and mangle its military headquarters. U.S. security policy reflects this gravity. The opening lines of the 2006 *National Security Strategy* read:

America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face—the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects our most solemn obligation: to protect the security of the American people.³¹²

³⁰⁸ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review* (2006), p. 44.

³⁰⁹ Congressman Robert Andrews, Interview (9 March 2005).

³¹⁰ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review* (2006), p. 44.

³¹¹ Jennifer D. Kibbe, “The Rise of the Shadow Warriors,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (March-April, 2004), pp. 102-103.

³¹² George W. Bush, *2006 National Security Strategy* (16 March 2006), p. 1.

Fighting terrorism, as the strategy goes on to say, cannot be done by attacking terrorist cells alone.

America also has an unprecedented opportunity to lay the foundations for future peace. The ideals that have inspired our history—freedom, democracy, and human dignity—are increasingly inspiring individuals and nations throughout the world. And because free nations tend toward peace, the advance of liberty will make America more secure.

These inseparable priorities—fighting and winning the war on terror and promoting freedom as the alternative to tyranny and despair—have now guided American policy for more than 40 years.³¹³

The language used in the *National Security Strategy* that deals with fighting the war on terrorism is the same type of language used concerning America's LIC policy throughout the 1990s.

In the period where SOF were at the forefront of American LICs, the capability maintained a varied focus by spearheading and supporting the conventional military in many types of American interventions. The war on terrorism has coalesced those many capabilities into the singular focus of leading and winning the GWOT, and that focus has been expressed in SOF doctrine. The 2006 *United States Special Operations Command Mission* states, in its entirety:

USSOCOM leads, plans, synchronizes and as directed, executes global missions against terrorist networks. USSOCOM trains, organizes, equips and deploys combat ready special operations forces to combatant commands.³¹⁴

The role of SOF is to lead the global network of U.S. regional combatant commands in fighting the GWOT. As outlined in the *National Security Strategy*, the ability of SOF to do so is based upon its skills in nation-building, freedom-spreading, and human rights promotion. SOF engaged in all of these missions in the 1990s; the mission is not new—rather, it is simply unified under one goal paramount to U.S. security strategy.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³¹⁴ 2006 *United States Special Operations Command Mission*, <<http://www.socom.mil>>.

The second major thematic change for SOF in this time period has been the move to a partially preventive capability. All of the campaigns discussed in the 1990s dealt with situations where the United States decided to respond to pre-existent threats. SOF were responsive. Special operations have always been deterrent *in exemplum*.³¹⁵ In other words, if a dictator (like General Noriega) begins denying human rights to his people, and SOF lead the way in an intervention to topple that dictator, then a successful intervention has the theoretically *in exemplum* deterrent capability of coercing other nations like the one invaded (Panama, in this case) to grant its people human rights.

As will be explained later, one of the largest roles of SOF in the GWOT comes in breaking vast networks of terrorist support globally. As SOF attempt to cultivate freedom and human rights in terrorist-permissive societies, the hope is to prevent future terrorist attacks. The USSOCOM *Command Vision* lays out what is the “end state” that SOF hope to achieve in their current mission. The closing sentence of that document reads that SOF ought to be, in the end, “Leading the Global War on Terrorism, accomplishing strategic objectives of the United States.”³¹⁶ SOF are inextricably linked to U.S. strategy by the GWOT. Reflecting the *National Security Strategy*, the strategic aim of SOF is to prevent terrorist acts before more Americans die. Though it is part of the mission, SOF do not simply hunt and kill terrorists *post facto*. Unlike the role of SOF in LICs in the 1990s, as President Bush writes, “We have kept on the offensive against our enemy.”³¹⁷ Unlike the previous security situation, the GWOT has dictated an offensive policy from Washington, aiming SOF at preventing future terrorist strikes.

³¹⁵ Lambakis, “Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World,” p. 212.

³¹⁶ 2006 *United States Special Operations Command Vision*, <<http://www.socom.mil>>.

³¹⁷ President Bush, 2006 *National Security Strategy*, p. 1.

In order to accomplish these major strategic innovations, SOF have undergone the following five empirical changes.

(1) In realizing lessons from history and early on in the GWOT, SOF have tried to do away with *ad hoc* task forces. A current “SOF Truth” is that “Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur.”³¹⁸ In order to stop terrorists before they act, SOF do not responsively innovate, but proactively plan.

(2) USSOCOM has moved from a *supporting* combatant command to a *supported* combatant command. The shift is one “From a force provider [to other combatant commands] to a combatant command with global responsibilities leading the War on Terrorism.”³¹⁹ USSOCOM now draws resources from other combatant commands as it fights a borderless war.

(3) SOF personnel have and will continue to increase in number. The Department of Defense has tasked USSOCOM with increasing its Army SF, Civil Affairs, and PSYOP personnel by 33% by 2007. Additionally, a Marines Special Operations Command (MARSOC), signifying the first Marines under USSOCOM, was formed, and will add 2,600 fighters with many special operations capabilities.³²⁰

(4) SOF funding has and will continue to increase. Since 2001, there has been an 81% growth in the SOF budget, and that is projected to continue to grow at an even higher rate. This is in order to match the increased strategic importance of SOF since 2001.³²¹

³¹⁸ United States Special Operations Command, *2005 Annual Report* (USSOCOM, 2005), p 27.

³¹⁹ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement 2006: Right Place, Right Time, Right Adversary* (USSOCOM, 2006), p. 1.

³²⁰ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, pp. 44-45.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

(5) SOF power has extended into civilian bureaucracies, especially the intelligence bureaucracy. From 2002 to the present, there has been significant funding “Dedicated to improvements in SOF intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), organic human intelligence and technical capabilities.”³²² Military Liaison Elements (MLEs), for instance, are small SOF units that reportedly work out of U.S. embassies in foreign nations to help gather intelligence on terrorism and then use that intelligence to prevent terrorist acts, and may be able to do so without explicit support of U.S. envoys to that nation.³²³

SOF in the War on Terrorism: Why and How?

The terrorist threat has been established and changes made in the SOF capability that respond to that threat have been discussed. Special operations have been recognized as the primary tool of U.S. strategy in the GWOT. Two questions remain: why do SOF now have the lead in the GWOT and how have SOF been utilized in U.S. security strategy (and likewise, how are they planning to be used) in fighting this global war in lieu of and in conjunction with conventional forces? Those two questions will be answered together in ten ways.

(1) SOF are easily and quickly adaptable to a changing security situation. It was and is difficult for the conventional military to innovate itself quickly and effectively to prevent an asymmetric terrorist threat. Unlike the conventional military, SOF have proven to be quickly adaptable to a security situation that quickly altered after 11 September 2001.

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³²³ Thom Shanker and Scott Shane, “Elite Troops Get Expanded Role On Intelligence,” *The New York Times* (8 March 2006), pp. A-1, A-8; Ann Scott Tyson and Dana Priest, “Operations Could Bypass Envoys,” *Washington Post* (24 February 2005), p. 1. It should be noted that these are only reports based on leaks to the press, not officially expressed actions of SOF.

The variety of possible strategies and military missions are without practical limit. For this reason, the variety of special operations possibilities ought to be regarded favorably by defense planners, especially in a world of rapid-paced change and novel security challenges. The readiness of special operations to execute military missions vital to the state, and their ability to serve directly and indirectly the will of the political leadership in nearly every conceivable politicomilitary context, underlie the unique dimension of special operations forces...The fact that special operations forces can perform multiple missions on any level of a conflict increases the likelihood that special operations will be relevant to a commander's particular military strategy.³²⁴

(2) As the United States has realized that conventional nation-building does not work, the role of SOF in fighting the GWOT has rapidly grown. A change in the language describing the strategic role of SOF from 2000 to 2006 reflects this growth. A special operations/LIC symposium held in 2000 acknowledged that SOF should have a proactive role in combating terrorism. Realistically, however, the focus of that meeting was that SOF should continue to prepare to fight post-cold war LICs—in other words, SOF should have maintained a role in US strategy similar to the one it had through the 1990s and planned to fight large-scale threats via technological innovations structured congruent with conventional technical military innovations. There was little focus on fighting a long-term war on terrorism.³²⁵ SOF doctrine statements likewise did not speak of any war on terror or of supporting that war, but similarly focused on continuing to innovate to combat normal low-level threats.³²⁶

Immediately after the terrorist strike in 2001, the United States took on a strategy of large-scale, conventional nation-building in the latter part of the assault in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. The role of SOF was at first limited to supporting conventional combatant commands in the GWOT. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's words suggest that the entire military, conventional capabilities included, should have changed

³²⁴ Lambakis, "Forty Selected Men Can Shake the World," p. 220.

³²⁵ Dr. Joshua Sinai, "How U.S. Defense Leaders View the Future Climate for Special Operations Forces," *Defense and Foreign Affairs' Strategic Policy* (February, 2000), pp. 10-17.

³²⁶ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement 2000: Providing Unique Solutions for a Changing World* (USSOCOM, 2000).

to fight the GWOT. Though acknowledging the success SOF had in the early stages of the war in Afghanistan, he went on to say that “Now is the time to change our armed forces...wars in the twenty-first century will increasingly require all elements of national power.” The words suggest that the entire military should have prepared to fight the many-fronted GWOT, girding to engage in nation-building in several underdeveloped and developing nations.³²⁷ The Pentagon had not yet figured out how to use its most elite troops in fighting this type of war.³²⁸

The war in Iraq, since the insurgency began, has shown that the conventional military is not capable of the quick reform necessary to win a battle of hearts and minds; and that insurgency has bogged down the large-scale military. The 2004 *Unified Command Plan* promptly stated that USSOCOM was to be the leading combatant command in the GWOT³²⁹—SOF were moved to the forefront of U.S. security strategy.

(3) The low-level presence of SOF helps solve the “brinksmanship” model of terrorist diplomacy. SOF inherently produce less collateral damage than conventional forces. Special operations are quieter than conventional operations. It is necessary to be offensive to counter terrorism; employing SOF allows U.S. policy makers to enjoy the strategic benefits of combating terrorists without the strategic fallout of openly intervening in Islamic nations. In other words, the United States can attack terrorists without terrorist leaders accusing the United States of being a “Blasphemous military presence”³³⁰ and thereby garnering increased anti-American sentiment. The clandestine and ambiguous nature of SOF allows the United States to define its own diplomacy,

³²⁷ Donald H. Rumsfeld, “Transforming the Military,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (May-June, 2002), pp. 20-32.

³²⁸ Max Boot, “What Makes Some Soldiers ‘Special,’” *Washington Post* (6 November 2002).

³²⁹ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, p. 44.

³³⁰ Byman, “Al Qaeda as an Adversary,” p. 144.

rather than allowing people like Osama bin Laden to define our strategic actions to the Islamic world.

(4) SOF allow for increased diplomatic success in the GWOT. As they have been used historically, SOF can act as a mid-level force escalator in between purely diplomatic and large-scale conventional military action. They allow for an operationally successful force projection that does not necessarily ruin attempts at diplomatic nation-building.

Furthermore, in the context of the GWOT, SOF can conduct their own diplomacy in offering both carrots and sticks in an attempt to coerce terrorists. SOF offer carrots as they grant human rights and unforeseeable freedoms to people that usually support terrorists and sticks in harshly but quietly killing terrorists.³³¹ The relatively quiet nature of this force presence allows for increased cooperation with other nations in combating terrorism while at the same time not compromising operational success. In preventing the emergence of more terrorism, the goal of SOF is to internally transform nations without making the source of that transformation widely known. The “[SOF] goal is to make local conditions untenable for terrorists through local focused engagement with like-minded nations to address the conditions that allow terrorism to emerge.” As these conditions change, SOF “Allow populations misinformed by censorship or other impediments to hear the truth, which is our most valuable tool.”³³² The truth will sway disenfranchised populations away from pro-terrorist Islamist sentiments. Most importantly, then, the United States hopes that the SOF capability allows leaders in the Middle East to have a greater opportunity to combat terrorism without openly

³³¹ Anna Simons and David Tucker, “United States Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March, 2003), p. 79.

³³² Dell L. Dailey and Jeffrey G. Webb, “U.S. Special Operations Command and the War on Terror,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 40 (1st Quarter, 2006), p. 46.

cooperating with the United States and thereby losing their Muslim base to anti Western Islamist factions.

(5) SOF can combat terrorism on all levels, and are thereby the only logical response to the threat. Conventional forces represent an asymmetric response to terrorism, whereas SOF, utilizing unconventional warfare for prevention, and classical anti-terrorist direct action ~~res~~es, offer a multi -level symmetric response.³³³ SOF have the ability to simultaneously conduct the war from the bottom up via proactive unconventional warfare—or winning hearts and minds and peeling away the layers of terrorist support; and conduct the war from the top down via direct action responsive to quickly actionable intelligence.

“The goal of Unconventional Warfare is to help win a war by working with—as opposed to neutralizing or fighting around—local populations...it demands that efforts at all levels—strategic, tactical, and operational—be coordinated.”³³⁴ From the outset of the war in Afghanistan through its first democratic elections and into the present, Army SF and other SOF personnel have infiltrated a disenfranchised society in order to give its people a sense of true entitlement. As the impoverished are influenced to tend away from terrorist Islamism, layers of terrorist support and funding and safe grounds on which terrorists have been able to train in the past are stripped away, and terrorism is prevented. There is an additional sense of democratic nationalism given to the disenfranchised as SOF fight with indigenous forces that is strategically important to the United States—terrorists become an adversary of the very people they hope to recruit.

The responsive part of the fight involves fighting from the top down. SOF place a

³³³ Alastair Finlan, “Warfare by Other Means: Special Forces, Terrorism and Grand Strategy,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, p. 92.

³³⁴ Simons and Tucker, “United States Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism,” p. 81.

large emphasis on special reconnaissance to collect good, actionable intelligence, and a direct action capability that allows for effective terrorist-hunting missions to be carried out based on this intelligence. This is a capability only possible given the advanced technology and joint nature of SOF.

Here is one example of this type of operation. In 2003, a Predator surveillance drone being run by an SOF team captured intelligence that an important terrorist leader was on the move in Afghanistan. Within minutes, a high-ranking SOF officer, U.S. Navy Captain Robert Harward, received notice of this, and gave the immediate go-ahead on a direct action mission to capture the terrorist. Within 30 minutes a plan was set, and within another 30 minutes, Mullah Khairullah Kahirkhawa, an important Taliban leader, was captured. The entire mission utilized Army, Air Force, Navy, and even Danish SOF.³³⁵ Only an effective unconventional campaign can ultimately prevent terrorism, but the strategic hope of these types of rapid and violent missions is to deter terrorists by making an example of some of them.

(6) Only a complex force can handle fighting a war on so many levels. The disjointed, complex, and somewhat unitary nature of small, soldier-centric SOF joint task forces allow the U.S. to offer a symmetric response to cell-oriented, unitary terrorist groups. One of the current “SOF Truths” is that “Humans are more important than hardware.”³³⁶ Reflecting this reliance on complex warriors as their greatest weapon, SOF have changed training to ensure that each war-fighter can be used as a multi faceted tool of U.S. strategy. Before the GWOT, for instance, certain Army SF focused on special reconnaissance, some on direct action, and some on unconventional warfare. Now, Army

³³⁵ Gordon T. Lee, “Hard-Shelled, SOF-Centered,”
<<http://www.rand.org/publications/randreview/issues/rr.08.02/hardshelled.html>>.

³³⁶ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement* 2006, p. 1.

SF are trained to be equally skilled in all three missions integral to winning the GWOT.³³⁷

(7) Only USSOCOM has the organizational ability to properly fight a long-term, global, and multi-front war that requires rapid deployment. SOF can be precisely tailored to fight a large-scale global war while still focusing on transformation on the local level. USSOCOM has pledged to fight a long-term war against terrorism, and has doctrinally tried to stop the use of *ad hoc* special operations, as it constantly tries to prepare for the future. In ensuring that its interventions in the GWOT are meaningful, however, USSOCOM has insisted that it will no longer deploy “Any place, any time,” but that it will be poised with a “Presence for purpose...to be at the right place, at the right time, facing the right adversary.”³³⁸ SOF, in other words, will maintain a general focus on winning the war on terrorism globally with a more acute focus on making strategically imperative local environments un-permissive to terrorism.

The nations SOF enters may not always be friendly ones; because “The battle may take place in an unfriendly foreign country, transporting a regular unit with the huge amount of support services it requires may simply not be politically possible.”³³⁹ Moreover, conventional nation-building has led to fighting a war that is limited to a purely local focus; after the experience in Iraq, the conventional military will not be able to fight many long-term battles to win hearts and minds. That role will fall on SOF, and USSOCOM has planned for it.

³³⁷ I gathered this information from an interview with an SOF officer at the O-5 level that is currently serving as a Congressional Defense Fellow (10 March 2005).

³³⁸ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement 2006*, p. 3.

³³⁹ Finlan, “Warfare by Other Means,” p. 94.

This role also calls for a rapidly deployable and adaptable force. The conventional military can take months to prepare itself for a specific deployment. Only USSOCOM has the ability to quickly extend its forces throughout the world. Once those forces are extended, SOF have a unique ability to adapt their mission focus to meet local strategic requirements. As SOF continue to be well-funded, the force will be able to innovate and adapt as quickly, if not quicker, than a constantly-morphing terrorist threat.³⁴⁰

(7) The GWOT will be a long war. SOF are able to gird themselves for and undertake this long-term strategic necessity without public opinion opposing their long-term, global deployment. The American public knows how many soldiers are dying in Iraq; it is largely unaware of special operators risking their lives in the Philippines and Indonesia.

(8) As SOF offensively and globally engage the enemy on his own ground, special operations have the ability to deflect attacks carried out on American soil like they were on 11 September 2001. The theory is simple. If the enemy is engaged wherever it exists, it is much harder for him to attack our home while his “home” is under fire.

(9) SOF are better at urban warfare than conventional forces. The terrorist enemy has an advantage in fighting urban warfare against conventional forces and attempts to mitigate the technological advantage that American forces have by forcing them to fight door-to-door. “Conventional forces are designed for battlefields not peacetime urban situations in which force must be applied with almost surgical care.”³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Kenney, “From Pablo to Osama,” p. 203.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

(10) Increased bureaucratic autonomy has helped SOF to be congruently adaptable to the terrorist threat; the ferocity of the bureaucratic fight against this extension of power is somewhat quelled by the relatively high capacity for interagency operability that SOF possess. SOF have received more leeway to carry out covert actions³⁴²; and it has been suggested by the 9/11 Commission Report that SOF take over paramilitary operations from the CIA.³⁴³ Finally, SOF have a growing role in collecting intelligence as they become deployed more globally. The ease and rapidity with which SOF can take on these extra tasks is a testament to their small size and the championing of their cause by the Department of Defense. Because SOF are so easily controlled, the Department of Defense can simply assign extra tasks to SOF, rather than going through the long and arduous process of making these changes doctrinal.

All of these reasons, taken together, seem to make a strong case for the utility of SOF in the GWOT. For all the planning and talk the Department of Defense has undertaken surrounding the expanded strategic role of SOF, the long war in Iraq is a drain on the implementation of those plans.

The original war in Afghanistan shows the influential role that SOF can have in U.S. strategy by fighting alone the GWOT. Within a month or so, about 300 American SOF were credited with taking out the Taliban regime³⁴⁴ and beginning to establish an environment in which terrorism could not emerge in the future. It would seem that this sort of operation is indicative of what USSOCOM has prepared to do in leading the GWOT.

³⁴² Kibbe, "The Rise of the Shadow Warriors," pp. 102-103.

³⁴³ Richard A. Best, Jr. and Andrew Feickert, *Special Operations Forces (SOF) and CIA Paramilitary Operations: Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005), p. 3.

³⁴⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, "Think Global, Fight Local," *Wall Street Journal* (19 December 2003).

The lengthy American intervention in Iraq, however, and to some extent that in Afghanistan, has forced USSOCOM to have both “short-term” and “long-term” goals. Because of the failure to plan for an insurgency, Iraq is now highly unstable. Consequently, “Instrumental in achieving [the short-term anti-terrorist objectives] is the creation of stability within Iraq and Afghanistan.”³⁴⁵

Thus, the “global” part of the “Global War on Terrorism” is relegated to a long-term goal.

On average in 2005, more than 85 percent of deployed SOF was in Central Command’s area of responsibility, leaving few special operators to pursue long-term operations in other areas such as the Philippines and the Trans Sahara region of Africa. Ultimately we have to be victorious in Afghanistan and Iraq to defeat terrorism, but the Global War on Terrorism will not be won in just Afghanistan and Iraq. Beyond these immediate conflicts lies the long-term fight.³⁴⁶

Beyond simply delaying the SOF-led GWOT, the failure in Iraq has allowed terrorist leaders to successfully engage in “brinksmanship” diplomacy, as the amount of collateral damage inflicted on Muslims in Iraq is growing daily, and the visibility of the force there is high. This makes the job that SOF must do in the future even more difficult.

As of now, SOF are forced to primarily focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, no matter what most the Department of Defense is planning for. Despite this, SOF are successfully extending force against terrorism in several other nations, and are the only type of force spreading U.S. security strategy outside of Afghanistan and Iraq. SOF have waged a successful unconventional warfare and direct action campaign in the Philippines against Islamist insurgents in that country.³⁴⁷ In addition to the fight there, SOF are recognized as having a presence in Senegal, Niger, Chad, Mali,

³⁴⁵ United States Special Operations Command, *Posture Statement 2006*, p. 3.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁴⁷ Robert Kaplan, “Imperial Grunts,” *The Atlantic Monthly-Atlantic Online* (October, 2005), <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200510/kaplan-us-special-forces>>, pp. 1-5.

Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Indonesia, and Colombia,³⁴⁸ and no doubt have a presence as the sole military extension of U.S. security strategy elsewhere.

Conclusion: Problems, Answers, and Recommendations in the Present and Future

The role of SOF in the GWOT, presently and as it is planned for, has caused some problems. This conclusion will identify and answer three such problems. The end of the section will offer a conclusion to the paper in assessing what the strategic role of SOF should be presently and into the future.

(1) It has always been a concern that increased SOF funding will lead to a deterioration of funds to the military at-large. This problem is really a misperception. In the latest defense budget, only one conventional program (the widely criticized Army Crusader system) was eliminated. Large conventional weapons systems like the F/A 22 Raptor program have not been cut, and do not appear to be threatened.³⁴⁹

As the funding for SOF grows, the defense budget more truly reflects the present security situation. In a situation where only SOF have the ability to lead the GWOT, SOF should have more money.³⁵⁰

(2) The second issue is that expanding SOF personnel by 33% violates the SOF truth of “Quality over Quantity,” and will thereby lead to a deterioration of the capability. That is not true. In the short-term, the military can gain effective soldiers by recruiting from a talent pool of seasoned combat veterans that have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for five years.³⁵¹ Additionally, in the long-term, a growth in the number of SOF officers will lead to a growth in the number of SOF personnel promoted to General

³⁴⁸ Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005), pp. 1-2.

³⁴⁹ Interview, O-5 SOF Officer.

³⁵⁰ Interview, Congressman Robert Andrews.

³⁵¹ Interview, O-5 SOF Officer.

officer ranks, and thereby positions of influence in the military bureaucracy. By ensuring more officers have a proper understanding of SOF, the present expansion of their personnel serves to strengthen the role that special operations can play in future U.S. security strategies.

(3) The final and most important problem with the current state of SOF deals with the repercussions of the Department of Defense rapidly expanding and changing the special operations capability. This is a two-level problem. First, an expanded SOF role could compromise the bureaucracies it infringes upon. More importantly, there is a significant chance that meshing four things—the ease and hastiness with which the executive can now deploy SOF; the rapidly increased strategic importance that SOF maintain; the vagueness of covert action laws; and the clandestine capability of SOF—provides an environment permissive to a special operation that could significantly harm U.S. foreign policy.³⁵²

Regarding the less important problem, the resistance of SOF entering specifically the intelligence community is indicative of the trend of intelligence agencies in general not wishing to give up any bureaucratic power. As the events of 11 September showed, the intelligence bureaucracy must be reformed; questioning the proper inculcation of SOF into that bureaucracy is part of the growing pains of intelligence reform.

The more important problem certainly is a grave one and is manifest by current policy options being discussed surrounding a nuclear Iran. A covert, PSYOP mission to discourage Iranians of the worth of a nuclear weapon is not the scary possibility, and may

³⁵² Kibbe, “The Rise of the Shadow Warriors,” pp. 102-115.

even be a useful tool in coercive diplomacy with Iran.³⁵³ The unfortunate incident would be a Bay of Pigs-like debacle where Americans use SOF in a raid on Iranian nuclear facilities. Historically, the U.S. has not used SOF to stop proliferation. In the recent Quadrennial Defense Review, SOF have been tasked with “Locating and ‘rendering safe’ WMD.”³⁵⁴ SOF may be effective in this role in combating nuclear terrorism, but a raid against a nation like Iran would offer no deniability for the United States; and, although it could be quite easily launched, would be a strategic disaster in the Middle East.

The situation begs the question: why are SOF being discussed as a tool of nuclear deterrence? The answer is that, presently, the United States is strategically mixed up. The conventional military is left fighting a war that would be better left to SOF; because they are bogged down by nation-building and counterinsurgency in Iraq, the large-scale military is left without being able to offer a credible threat to Iran. So SOF need to be discussed as a possible method of nuclear deterrence, rather than focus on the GWOT—a war that only SOF have the military capability to win.

The large-scale security environment is relatively easy to project. Just as it is hard for the United States military to undergo an overnight change, it is difficult for a major threat to emerge quickly. It will be no surprise when, in 10 or 20 years, we may need a standing military capable of deterring China, Iran, and/or North Korea. The conventional military should focus on offering a deterrent to slowly-emergent, large-scale threats, rather than scrambling to focus on small-scale wars that it is not fit to win.

³⁵³ Terrence Henry, “The Covert Option: Can sabotage and assassination stop Iran from going nuclear?,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (December, 2005), pp. 54-55.

³⁵⁴ Department of Defense, 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, p. 45.

At this point, especially as the future for SOF promises that more of its officers will be promoted to important positions that are able to effectively understand the capability, special operations will always play an important role in U.S. security strategy.

It is impossible to predict what, exactly, that role will be. Relative to major geopolitical threats, low-level threats are extremely difficult to project. Looking back from 1942 to the present, this unpredictability is tantamount to the role of special operations in U.S. strategy. Once SOF were properly understood, the adaptability of these precise warriors has allowed them to be carefully and quickly tailored to meet the needs of specific and important policy objectives, especially when dealing with quickly-emergent, rapidly changing low-level threats. As these low-level adversaries have continued to evolve and become increasingly dangerous, SOF will be most effectively utilized by continuing to innovate congruently with these types of threats, maintaining a standing proactive ability to counter them, and thus remaining an imperative piece of U.S. security strategy.

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